Relevance Theory
and
Literary Interpretation

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Abstract

The thesis aims to contribute to literary studies by characterising literary interpretation not as a unique activity but as a subset of general communication, driven by a global cognitive strategy: the search for relevance. It will use relevance theory to account for the production and evaluation of literary interpretations. It also attempts to shed light on the notion of literariness.

The thesis briefly treats the major schools of thought on literature and literary interpretation, and criticises the communication model which underlies virtually all of them. A sketch of relevance theory is given, setting out the basic arguments of the theory with emphasis on those aspects most pertinent to literature: the writer's intention, and the question of responsibility in interpretation.

This discussion raises issues of vagueness and indeterminacy, and the effects peculiar to the literary work. These, it is argued, play a crucial role in conveying the writer's intention, and in creating literary or "poetic" effects. Detailed discussion of specific literary works, both prose and verse, illustrates how the interpretive process might work in relevance-theoretic terms. The notion of "foregrounding" is discussed, and a relevance-theoretic approach to the phenomenon is illustrated in a discussion of repetition and irony in prose and verse.

Finally, the thesis returns to what constitutes a literary interpretation, and distinguishes on principled grounds between interpretations produced in the search for optimal relevance (exegetical) from those produced in the search for actual or maximal relevance (eisegetical). A discussion of what distinguishes the literary interpretation and the literary work develops the implications of this application. The thesis concludes with a consideration of the question of what properties characterise a classic work, and to considerations related to the formation of a canon, especially in literature.

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Introduction:
Approaches to literary interpretation

> I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts... I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them... Will you believe me?... there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration. Plato, *Apology*

1. Introduction

There is a vast and growing literature on the interrelated subjects of literary interpretation, critical theory, theories of communication and reading, and theories of literature. Critical and literary theories are now so numerous and varied that surveys are becoming almost impossible. Most writers on critical theory and practice choose either to do justice to a single area of the field (Pratt 1977; Norris 1985) or attempt an historical and thematic treatment (Abrams 1971; Fokkema and Ibsch 1978; Eagleton 1983; Adams and Searle 1986; Bonnycastle 1991). Either the writer curtails discussion of the development and history of ideas, or she sacrifices in-depth treatment of any but major writers in any one area. The limits and merits of any one approach are clear enough, but we may lose sight of the fact that the range of topics and theories has grown so large that it is unmanageable.

The range of the discipline invites heterogeneity; it encourages theorists and students to select elements of various accounts that are pertinent, relevant, or supportive of their own views while excluding elements (sometimes from the same accounts) that would weaken their case. Even among like-minded writers, we find sometimes so little common ground that further disunity is inevitable. Historical approaches reveal the fluidity of theoretical positions in the field without necessarily contributing much in the way of coherence. Because ideas are liable to extraordinary mutations, the source of any idea in literary studies may have no effect on its evolution. We can see unexpected developments not only within schools of thought, but in the body of work of a single writer (for example, Hillis Miller's progression from formalism through phenomenology to deconstruction).

In my view, in the absence of coherent, unified accounts of interpretation and related

areas, detailed criticism of any one approach is beside the point. This thesis will argue that relevance theory provides just the kind of coherent, unified approach that the field needs. My arguments do not depend for their validity on detailed rebuttals of "competing" theories; indeed, relevance theory has not developed as a reply to any of them. Instead it comes out of the linguistic discipline of pragmatics. Thus, while relevance theory argues against some of the basic premises common to many literary theories, it occupies a position separate from most of them. Relevance theory is concerned with the general nature of human communication and cognition. The main goal of this thesis is to draw out some of the implications of relevance theory for the study of literary interpretation.

In approaching this topic, I have drawn on two previous surveys by relevance-theorists. In particular, I have found Pilkington's analysis of the major schools in literary and aesthetic criticism (Pilkington 1994) both insightful and suggestive. I am indebted to his thoroughness and deftness in teasing out the threads connecting apparently disparate writers and positions. Here I will take a slightly different approach, suggested by Sperber and Wilson in several lectures and papers, and touched on in *Relevance* (1986a).

Sperber and Wilson (1986a) take an approach which, while broadly historical, permits us to distinguish competing theories through a recognition of their theoretical sympathies, so to speak. They identify two major streams in literary criticism and theory: the *classical* and the *romantic*. From this very simple division we can go on to make ever finer distinctions, allowing for particulars of time and place. More importantly, we can see points held in common by both schools, particularly in their models of communication. We will see that these are generally areas where even the deepest theoretical separations may be bridged by common assumptions, which have never been properly evaluated.

I will first briefly consider the basic assumptions about language, communication and interpretation held by classical and romantic criticism.

2. Language, communication, and meaning

The classical approach to meaning and communication goes back at least to Aristotle. We can describe its fundamental assumptions about language, communication and meaning as follows:

(1a) Every utterance has a literal meaning.

(1b) Everything that is conveyed by an utterance can be literally paraphrased without loss of meaning.

(1c) The norm in communication is literal truthfulness.

(1d) Figurative utterances (eg, metaphor, irony) are departures from the norm of literal truthfulness.

(1e) Everything that is conveyed by a figurative utterance can be literally paraphrased without loss of meaning; figures are purely decorative.

It's worth noting that these assumptions are shared not only by critics within literary studies, but by Gricean pragmatics (see Grice 1989). I'll return to the implications of these assumptions presently.

The more recent romantic tradition is characterised by its denial of each of these assumptions:

(2a) There is no such thing as literal meaning.

(2b) What is conveyed by an utterance cannot be paraphrased without loss.

(2c) There is no norm of literal truthfulness.

(2d) Figurative utterances are not departures from a norm of literal truthfulness.

(2e) Figurative utterances are not paraphraseable without loss; they make an essential contribution to the meaning of the text.

There is thus a huge gulf separating romantic and classical views on language, communication and meaning. Furthermore, I will argue that the division is alive and well, and continues to affect contemporary criticism. Contemporary critics can also be divided into classical and romantic schools.

One problem with the classical approach arises from its suggestion (1b) that there is no essential difference between explicit and implicit communication. Information is left implicit, rather than explicitly spelled out, only to save time and effort. Yet we know that it is frequently not possible to produce an explicit paraphrase of the implicatures of an utterance. We can illustrate this with one of Grice's most famous examples.

Consider the case of Peter and Mary discussing a mutual friend who has just begun a job with a bank.

Mary: How is John getting on in his job?

Peter: Oh, quite well, I think. He likes his colleagues, and he hasn't been to prison yet.

An attempt to spell out the implications of Peter's utterance not only reveals the existence of a range of possibilities, but also destroys the jokey effect his original utterance produced. The classical (and Gricean) accounts of communication and meaning are inadequate. This is particularly important when we come to consider what is communicated by a work of literature. The question of indeterminacy and poetic effects is taken up in Chapter 2.

The romantic tradition grants the importance of implicit communication, and especially of figurative utterances. But its repudiation of literal meaning - if correct - would make it impossible to produce precise theories of literature - or, indeed, of anything at all. The latest descendants of the romantic tradition, the post-structuralists, assume that all language is metaphorical, and truth merely a delusion. This stance is self-defeating: if accurate communication is impossible, why say anything at all?

Relevance theory claims to occupy a position between these two extremes. While assuming that there is such a thing as literal meaning, it otherwise accepts much of the romantic approach. Its approach might be summed up as follows:

(3a) There is such a thing as literal meaning.

(3b) What is conveyed by an utterance is not always paraphraseable without loss.

(3c) There is no norm of literal truthfulness.

(3d) Figurative utterances are not departures from a norm of literal truthfulness.

(3e) Figurative utterances cannot be paraphrased without loss; they are integral to the meaning of the text.

As Wilson puts it, "relevance theory takes a classical approach to semantics, but a romantic approach to pragmatics" (Wilson 1994: 230).

This position rejects some fundamental assumptions of both classical and romantic accounts. Instead of seeing the "meaning" of an utterance or text as something entirely created by the reader (along romantic lines), or entirely encoded by the speaker (as claimed in classical accounts), relevance theory argues that the reader's interpretation is an hypothesis produced and evaluated by the reader, using evidence expressly provided for that purpose by the writer. Responsibility for arriving at the intended interpretation is thus shared by writer and reader. Chapter 1 presents the arguments in this area in greater detail.

Having sketched a division between classical and romantic approaches, let's consider the degree to which this initial division permits us to categorise most current schools of

thought in literary studies and critical theory.

3. Schools of thought

Before investigating literary and critical theories, let's consider the purpose of having theories of literature in the first place. Ibsch and Fokkema suggest, along traditional lines, that "we need theories of literature in our attempts to interpret literary texts and to explain literature as a specific mode of communication" (Fokkema and Ibsch 1978: 1). More recently, there has been a shift from looking at literature as an object of study to looking at the means by which literary interpretations and judgements are produced (see Eagleton 1983: 10-11). In fact, Eagleton's *Literary Theory* (1983) begins "by challenging the notion that `literature'" is an object which can be studied; he argues that literature is better defined as "valued writing", and characterises the major literary and critical theories as "nails" intended to "be driven through [the literary work] to give it a fixed meaning" (Eagleton 1983: 88). These "nails" include "authorial intention" (Eagleton 1983: 67-74), reception theory (Eagleton 1983: 74-88), and Fish's notion of "interpretive communities" (Eagleton 1983: 89-90). He devotes an entire chapter (Eagleton 1983: 91-126) to the "enormous nail" which twentieth-century critics carried in their "literary theoretical armoury with which to fix the literary work once and for all" - structuralism. Eagleton's own emphasis is, as I have suggested, on the strategies by which literary readings and judgements are produced; he assumes that "there is no such thing as a purely `literary' approach: all such responses", even those pertaining to literary form, "are deeply imbricated with the kind of social and historical individuals we are" (Eagleton 1983: 89). Eagleton thus moves from the notion of literature as "a specific mode of communication" to a position that sees literature and literary readings as acts of personal and political revelation.

If it is possible to have such widely differing views of the aims of literary theory, then how can a survey hope to do more than skim the surface? Eagleton suggests the answer: he say that "we ourselves are post-Romantics, in the sense of being products of that epoch rather than confidently posterior to it" (Eagleton 1983: 18). By acknowledging the degree to which the romantic view, not just of literature but of language, has influenced the development and evaluation of literary theory, Eagleton provides a way of throwing into focus his sharp differences from the more classical position described by Fokkema and Ibsch as "the

scientific study of literature" (Fokkema and Ibsch 1978: 1). If we see these two positions as not only polarised but in some measure united by their fundamental positions regarding language and communication, then we have some way of coming to terms with their fundamental similarities as well as their differences.

Now, to some extent Eagleton's description of literary theory as an attempt to fix the nature of the literary work is disingenuous. Many writers across the theoretical spectrum have no such purpose (Child 1965, Chapman 1973, Fish 1980). We might begin by making a broad distinction between those who do and those who have other goals (Freeman 1970, 1981, Genette 1982, Leitch 1983, Bloom 1994). We will then find that those who are intent on "defining" literature as an object of study generally accept some version of (1a), the contention that "every utterance has a literal meaning". This meaning may be seen as uniquely intended by the writer (Hirsch 1967), or created by the writer (Tompkins 1980), as the result of a unique confluence of codes (Barthes 1975), or the effect of defamiliarization (Mukarovsky in Steiner 1982). It may be seen as intended to be recovered by the reader (Hirsch 1967) or subject immediately to reinterpretation (Culler 1976, Derrida 1974). In each case, the interpretation process is thought of as starting from some literal meaning that is encoded in or communicated by the text.

Those who take this approach to literature can be seen as part of the classical tradition. Thomas Aquinas, in his discussion of sacred literature, sums up this position:

> ...whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science [ie, exegesis] has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore the first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it.[1] ... the literal sense is that which the author intends...
>
> ...no confusion results, for all the senses are founded on one - the literal - from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended allegorically, as Augustine says.
>
> (in Adams 1971: 118-119)

All theories which share this conviction, that there is an original, literal, meaning thus belong in some degree to the classical tradition of poetics. E D Hirsch is probably the best-known contemporary proponent of this tradition; however, as noted above, it has been adopted by

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[1] We can see the similarity between this argument and the classical approach to metaphor as ornament or distortion of the original or literal sense. See Aristotle's *Poetics* (Dorsch 1965: 61).

writers who have otherwise quite diverse views.

4. Romanticism and the structuralist tradition

Deconstruction and other post-structuralist theories fall within the romantic tradition, for critics in these fields generally assume that "language does not merely *represent* the world, it also organizes the world" (Bonnycastle 1991: 93; author's emphasis); it "is the means by which we know ourselves" and others (Bonnycastle 1991: 67). Since "any truth couched in a particular language is affected or distorted by that language", then "*nothing expressed in language is absolutely true*" (Bonnycastle 1991: 93; author's emphasis). It's not hard to see how close this is to the first premise of the romantic approach, as outlined above. Rejection of literal truth and literal meaning generally go together. We can follow the influence of romanticism in literary theory by tracing the development of the "scientific" study of language from (classical) Formalism to (romantic) deconstruction.

The Russian formalists generally assumed the existence of literal meaning: hence their separation of language into "practical" and "poetic". However, they almost immediately turned to investigating the "meaning" of poetic devices, to "understanding ... verse as a special form of speech having special linguistic (syntactical, lexical and semantic) features" (Eichenbaum in Adams 1971: 846). In so doing, they again adopted the classical view of figurative meaning as a set of more or less codified departures from the literal. Ultimately, though, this change in emphasis led them to reject the idea of "practical or "non-poetic" language use altogether, and they drifted toward a romantic view of poetic language. We could sum up the final position of the Russian Formalists as the assertion that "different forms must have different meanings" (Fokkema and Ibsch 1978: 13), which is close to the position that figurative (poetic) utterances cannot be paraphrased without loss. As Tolstoy put it:

> If I would want to say in words all that I intended to express in the novel [Anna Karenina], then I would have to rewrite the very novel which I have written..." (in Fokkema and Ibsch 1978:13)

The Formalist emphasis on the forms or structures which they saw as the source of literariness shifted as the original scope of research was extended. Where before the point had been to demonstrate how poetic language differed from practical language by various

means (defamiliarisation, poetic forms, verse as specialised speech), now it was declared that poetic meaning was *a direct result of* the forms and structures of poetic language. This subtle but important shift led to the complete abandonment of the "scientific" approach to literature; if poetic meaning resulted from poetic structures, then there was no point in treating it as codified departures from literal meaning. And indeed, the structuralists soon concluded that poetic structures themselves have no fixed meaning, either. Deconstruction, the latest phase in post-structuralist thought, can thus be seen as ultimately descended from the formalist approach.

To understand how completely Formalism was transformed in the process, we may look at some recent claims about the source of poetic meaning. Stanley Fish maintains that "Interpreters do not decode poems, they make them"; the suggestion is that there is no such thing as a literal (encoded) meaning. But it is Derrida who most completely expresses this position:

> Radicalizing the concepts of interpretation, perspective, evaluation, difference, and all the "empiricist" or nonphilosophical motifs that have constantly tormented philosophy throughout the history of the West ... Nietzsche ... contributed a great deal to the liberation of the signifier from its dependence or derivation with respect to the logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified, in whatever sense that is understood. Reading, and therefore writing, the text were for Nietzsche "originary" operations ... with regard to a sense that they do not have first to transcribe or discover, which would not therefore be a truth signified in the original element and presence of the logos... or the structure of a priori necessity. (Derrida 1974, 1976: 19)

Derrida's utter rejection of the possibility of an original meaning is romantic position taken to its logical conclusion. But there are other, less radical approaches that take a similar position. Culler (1981), discussing semiotics in a chapter called "In Pursuit of Signs", tells us that literature "is the most interesting case of semiosis" because, although

> it is clearly a form of communication, it is cut off from the immediate pragmatic purposes which simplify other sign situations. [However] ... signification is undoubtedly taking place. One cannot argue, as one might when dealing with physical objects or events of various kinds, that the phenomena in question are meaningless. Literature forces one to face the problem of the indeterminacy of meaning, which is a central if paradoxical property of semiotic systems. (Culler 1981: 35)

Culler reverses the priority placed by early Formalists on "practical language" as opposed to "poetic language". Although they left the description of practical language to linguists, there

is little doubt that the early Formalists believed in its existence prior to and separate from literary language. With post-structuralism, however, the "indeterminacy of the sign" has been extended to practical language as well. As one writer remarked, "Derrida (and other post-structuralists) have left language hanging, unanchored to anything that would lend determinate semantic values to its words" (Mitchell, quoted in Norris 1985: 69).

I have argued that we can distinguish literary and critical theories by their position on premise (1) above: whether or not utterances have literal meaning. However, Eagleton is quite right when he remarks that we are all post-romantics, for romantic assumptions about poetry and literariness have permeated our thinking about language and literature, as shown by my discussion above. The Formalists (and later the Structuralists) attempted a scientific analysis of the meaning of poetic devices, and concluded that no intrinsic meanings exist. The post-structuralists and deconstructionists extended this view to linguistic meaning as a whole - which they characterised as marked by "undecidability" or "instability". In the early days of Formalism, most writers shared the classical assumption that something is *done to* language in the process of making it literary.[2] The original aim was to demonstrate how these deviations from an original meaning create the literary effect. Recent theories, however, take the view that there is no norm to depart from, and no determinate meaning to convey. Though these theories apparently began firmly in the classical tradition, ultimately they express romantic views.

5. Classicism and the New Criticism

I A Richards' *Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1939, 1965) placed itself squarely in the romantic tradition. After criticising classical approaches to rhetoric, Richards firmly rejected the classic approach to semantics, which he called the "Proper Meaning Superstition":

> That is, the common belief - encouraged officially by what lingers on in the school manuals on Rhetoric - that a word has a meaning of its own ... independent of and controlling its used and the purpose for which it should be uttered." (Richards 1936, 1965: 11)

This rejection of literal meaning shows clear affinities to the views of romantic poets such

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[2] Note Eagleton's description of Jakobson's representation of literature as "organized violence committed on ordinary speech" (quoted in Eagleton 1981: 2); and Fokkema and Ibsch's comment that, in the Formalist view, "[i]n literature the material must be `deformed' rather than formed" (1978: 23).

as Coleridge and Wordsworth.

Richards also shared the romantic view of poetry set forth by Wordsworth. "Poetry", Wordsworth asserted,

> "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings; it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquillity: the emotion is contemplated till, by a species of reaction, the tranquillity gradually disappears, and an emotion ... is gradually produced, and does itself actually exist in the mind." (from the "Preface" to the *Second Edition of Lyrical Ballads*)

The means by which this powerful effect is created is the organic form of the poem; as MacLeish puts it, "A poem should not mean/But be". This emphasis on the form of literature derives from the romantic concept of art as divine madness or inspiration. The purpose of poetry was to (re)create the moment of inspiration in the reader by means uniquely appropriate to each situation.

Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) is shot through with statements that could be asserted only if Richards accepted Wordsworth's (and Coleridge's, De Quincy's, and others') assumption that the form of the poem is intrinsic to its meaning and impact. Cleanth Brooks, in *The Well-Wrought Urn*, while apparently retaining the assumption of literal meaning, nonetheless shares the romantic view of the poet as "continually forced to remake language" (Brooks 1947, 1949: 192).[3] He also criticises Kazin's characterisation of "new formalism" (the New Criticism) as being based on a "false dilemma":

> [either] the critic is forced to judge the poem by its political or scientific or philosophical truth; or, he is forced to judge the poem by its form as conceived externally and detached from human experience. ... since [the New Critics] refuse to rank poems by their messages, [Kazin] assumes that they are compelled to rank them by their formal embellishments. (Brooks 1947, 1949: 179-180)

Brooks argues, like Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Wordsworth that "it is not possible to elaborate a summarizing proposition [of] ... what the poem `says' as a poem, a proposition which will say it fully and will say it exactly, no more and no less" (Brooks 1947, 1949: 188). He talks of "the heresy of paraphrase", echoing the views summed up in (2b) and (2e) above.

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[3] In a footnote to this chapter, Brooks quotes from Susanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key* in the course of discussing views of poetry similar to his own (Brooks 1947, 1949: 186). Part of that quotation is worth including here:

> ...though the *material* of poetry is verbal, its import is not in the literal assertion made in the words, but *the way the assertion is made*... (emphasis in Brooks).

Brooks' position is similar to that of many of the New Critics.

The New Critics are descendants of the romantic tradition, especially in the degree to which they insist on the meaning of form and the impossibility of paraphrase: as Brooks suggests, echoing Tolstoy, if a poet had been able to express his thoughts in a different form, he would not have had to write the poem in the first place (Brooks 1947, 1949: 188). However, in the early stages of New Criticism there were already emerging signs of classical critical thought. John Crowe Ransome, in his essay "Criticism as Pure Speculation" (in Adams 1971: 881-890), compares the "texture" of a poem to the decoration of a house. While the form of the poem clearly has a function, the texture of the poem (for instance, its symbols or metaphors) is "`decoration'" (in Adams 1971: 887). There is a connection here with the Aristotelian view of figurative language as decorative embellishment of a text.

The New Criticism went in two directions. One developed the idea that elements of the text (the poem) cannot be paraphrased, or "reduced", and concentrated on ways in which its meaning could be best apprehended. Critics such as E D Hirsch extended this idea to the meaning of the work as a whole; they argued that this was *also* irreducible, and therefore unique, and aimed to define the skills and strategies by which the reader could grasp and understand this meaning. Hirsch became among the best-known of these "objectivist" critics, so called because they treated the meaning, like the work, as an object to be studied empirically. The other direction which New Criticism pursued was to look at the personal nature both of the process of interpretation and writing. Since the writer's intention was assumed to be irrelevant and the text irreducible (Eagleton remarks that the New Critics made a "fetish" of the poem (Eagleton 1983: 40)[4]), it was thought that the poem might be analysed

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[4] Eagleton's description of this area of critical theory and practice (Eagleton 1983: 49) reveals an attitude which may help explain the eclipse of New Criticism in current discussion:

> What New Criticism did, in fact, was to convert the poem into a fetish. If I A Richards had "de-materialized" the text, reducing it to a transparent window on to the poet's psyche, the American New Critics rematerialized it with a vengeance, making it seem less like a process of meaning than something with four corners and a pebbledash front. ... The New Critical poem, like the Romantic symbol, was thus imbued with an absolute mystical authority which brooked no rational argument. Like most of the other literary theories we have examined so far, New Criticism was at root a full-blooded irrationalism. ... Yet this is not to suggest that New Criticism was hostile to critical analysis... Whereas some earlier Romantics tended to bow low in reverent silence before the unfathomable mystery of the text, the New Critics deliberately cultivated the toughest, most hard-headed techniques of critical dissection. The same impulse which stirred them to insist on the "objective" status of the work also led them to promote a strictly "objective" way of analysing it.

Eagleton's discussion is of course influenced by his own Marxist critical stance, but his remarks go to the heart of current distaste with the theories, if not the practice, of New Criticism.

in terms of its effect on the reader. Despite many superficial connections between reception theory (or reader-response theory) and post-structuralism, the guiding principle in the former remains the assumption that, no matter how the reader realised a work, he based his conclusions to some degree on evidence provided by the text. As Schmidt remarks:

> Reception occurs as a process creating meaning, which realizes the *instructions given in the linguistic appearance of the text.* (Schmidt 1973: 28-9, quoted in Fokkema and Ibsch 1978: 137, italics mine)

Both types of New Criticism, descended from the romantic tradition, have drifted into a more classical position, as shown by their concern with "objective" meaning. While reader-response theory focuses on the "gaps" in the text, objectivists attempt to discover which unique meaning or set of instructions is realised in any given interpretation.

A similar drift away from romanticism can be seen in the general attitude of New Criticism toward figurative language. Instead of seeing metaphor, say, as something intrinsic to language use, many critics in this area characterise figures of speech and figures of thought as properties of the text. In this way, specific effects are linked to the presence of specific instances of figurative language, but the general phenomenon of tropes is left unaccounted for. Consequently, the treatment of tropes and figures of speech varies very widely among the inheritors of the New Criticism. Indeed, some are nearly incoherent, attempting to reconcile a fundamentally romantic view of figurative language with the classical claim that literary effects are the result of deformations of or deviations from a given linguistic or pragmatic code.[5]

We have now seen how a school which began as an attempt to treat literature

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[5] Consider Vincent Leitch's remarks on de Man and Nietzsche:

> The most lucid and direct expression of de Man's fundamental notions about language and rhetoric emerges in a conference presentation on Nietzsche's theory of rhetoric (1973), where we learn that Nietzsche shifts the study of rhetoric from methods of persuasion and eloquence to the prior study of figures and tropes. About Nietzsche's formulation that "Tropes are not something that can be added and subtracted from language at will; they are its truest nature", we discover:
>
> > ...the straightforward affirmation that the paradigmatic structure of language is rhetorical rather than representational or expressive of a referential, proper meaning ... marks a full reversal of the established societies whicht traditionally root the authority of language in its adequation to an extralinguistic referent or meaning, rather than in the intralinguistic resources of figures. (Kramer 1984: 125)

Nevertheless, we are earlier told that

> As a system of signs, language operates by phonological, syntactic and semantic rules. ... Since all accounts and descriptions are given in language (sign codes), they are not simply referential. Structures are necessarily fictions-interpretations. (Kramer 1984: 114)

empirically and objectively (Formalism) ended up in the extreme romantic position of denying literal meaning. We have also seen how a school which set out from purely romantic assumptions (New Criticism) has in some ways adopted classical views. Clearly, literary and critical theories are subject to remarkable and largely unpredictable change. Despite the various transformations, however, we can characterise and distinguish any particular theory along the general lines proposed in section (2).

I am interested at this point in examining the fluidity which seems to characterise the theories I have been discussing. Although the distinction between classical and romantic approaches proves useful enough in sorting through various schools of thought, it is clear that this alone will not account for the peculiar way in which literary theories have mutated in the last half of this century. We cannot put the entire phenomenon down to the fact of our being "post-Romantics", since there are still many who assert the existence of literal meaning, and assume that the norm in communication is literal truthfulness, even though they are otherwise clearly in the romantic tradition. There are several interrelated issues that have to be addressed here: the fission characteristic of literary and critical theories, the general incoherence of critical theory and practice, and the fact that even those theorists who deny original meaning (eg, Culler, Fish) share some basic theoretical premises with those who assert it (objectivists). I will argue that we can understand this situation if we examine a premise shared by virtually all literary and critical theorists: their acceptance of the code model of communication. Let's turn, then, to what unites the disputants.

6. The code model of communication and literary theory

All theories of literature either derive from, or imply, some theory of communication. In the first place, it's not much use to claim that a poem communicates such-and-such if we don't know what it is to communicate *anything*; moreover, one of the first questions any literary theory must answer is whether literature counts as communication at all. Most literary theories actually approach this issue from the other side: that is, they evaluate theories of communication according to whether they support or undermine the accounts the critical or literary theory proposes.

This has the curious effect of leading some otherwise sensible critics not just to ignore but to disregard important work in disciplines related to communication, such as linguistics.

Consider Barthes' comment that

> Those who carry on literary analysis must sometimes demand a linguistics which does not exist. It is their role to determine, to a certain degree, the need for a lingusitics that does not exist. ... literary analysis will need a change in linguistics. I insist on this kind of methodological relationship; literary semiotics cannot be considered simply as a follower or a parasite of linguistics. (Barthes in Macksey 1970: 316-317)

This attitude also explains why many critical theorists look to Saussure and Whorf for their linguistics while brushing aside more recent work by Grice, Searle, and Chomsky. At the time that many of the present schools of literary and critical thought were forming, Saussure and Whorf (to name two of the most influential linguists) were at the cutting edge; but many significant developments have occurred in all the areas bordering on literary theory. Similarly, Peirce and Morris remain important figures in literary semiotics and theory, though neither philosopher's work is now used in its original form in communication theory. In the same way, sociologists, political thinkers, and philosophers central to many current critical approaches (such as Levi-Strauss, Bakhtin, and Althusser) are being re-examined within their own fields.

However, what virtually all current literary theorists share is the conviction that the code model of communication - whether or not this includes literature - is both adequate and generally true. That is, virtually everyone in the area of literary theory and practice assumes that thoughts are encoded in language by the speaker (or the writer) and then decoded by the hearer (or reader). The fact that this model cannot account for even the simplest facts of human communication escapes notice; indeed, certain aspects of the code model, such as its opposition between coded/uncoded, noise/communication, and norm/deviation, have been incorporated into some critical theories. The notion that meaning is produced by an oscillation of irreconcilable oppositions (Derrida 1974, Leitch 1983, 1984) actually derives from the code model by way of Peircean semiotics, formalism, and Saussurean phonetics. Without the code model to provide a descriptive counterpart to the metaphors of many critical theories, they would be revealed immediately as untenable.[6] Let's look briefly at the

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[6] Think, for instance, of Bakhtinian dialectics without a code model support. It would then become apparent that the notion of dialectics here is derived partly from classical philosophy and partly from an outmoded and discredited political philosophy. Consider, too, what would happen to the entire post-structuralist field without a code model of communication: an inferential model is incompatible with the idea that meaning is the invention of the hearer or reader, since inference requires at the very least evidence derived from some

(continued...)

connection between the code model and critical or literary theory.

Under the term "code model of communication" I include all theories of communication which claim that communication is achieved by encoding and decoding messages. A code is the system which matches a message with a signal; when the signal is received, the receiver can retrieve or duplicate the message by reversing the process. Now, for this model of communication to work at all, both sender and receiver must share the entire code, which may be simple (semaphore) or more complex (a natural language, consisting of symbols and rules which direct the matching process). Barring distortion of the signal, as long as both the communicator and her audience share an identical code, then successful communication is guaranteed.

Yet we know that communication often fails: misunderstandings occur, and ambiguities are commonplace. Where distortion of the signal is clearly not the problem, these failures have been treated as evidence that the communicator and her audience possess slightly different codes. However, it should be apparent that in the absence of other interpretive mechanisms, even slight differences between codes might make it impossible for communication to occur at all.[7]

It might be thought that the evidence of linguistics shows that this objection is groundless. Although most linguists agree that the grammar of a language is a code, we also know that no two speakers of a language possess identical linguistic codes, so that we can

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[6](...continued)
source, and a means by which to evaluate hypotheses, neither of which are possible in a strictly deconstructionist or post-structuralist view of langauge.

[7] In his article "Exhibit X" (Thurber 1981: 117-122), James Thurber recounts his version of a coding mishap that sent a dozen code clerks to Paris at the height of the 1918 Peace Conference negotiations:

> ...the State Department in Washington had received a cablegram from Colonel House in Paris urgently requesting the immediate shipment of twelve or fifteen code clerks to the Crillon ... Colonel House's cablegram must have urgently requested the immediate shipment of twelve or fifteen code books, not code clerks. The cipher groups for "books" and "clerks" must have been nearly identical, say "DOGEC" and "DOGED", and hence a setup for the telegraphic garble. ... A "D" for a "C" sent Colonel House clerks instead of books, and sent me to France instead of Switzerland. ...
>
> ...An admiral of the Navy, for some reason (probably because he had a lot of Navy code books), arbitrarily took over ... and a code shambles ... developed when cablegrams in Navy codes were dispatched to the State Department in Washington, which could not figure them out and sent back bewildered and frantic queries in State Department codes, which the admiral and his aides could not unravel. ... And think of it - a "DOGEC" for a "DOGED" would have sent me to Berne, where nothing at all ever happened. (Thurber 1981: 120-121)

Burlesque aspects to one side, this incident illustrates rather well the actual difficulties a true code model of communication would labour under.

speak of idiolects as well as dialects and sociolects. If differences in code destroy the possibility of communication, even speakers of the same language ought not to be able to communicate. Surely, it might be argued, the fact that communication occurs is the best argument for acceptance of the code model of communication?

This objection is invalid, since it assumes that which needs to be proved, namely that communication can only take place by means of a code. Moreover, the code model of communication can explain neither gross misunderstandings between speakers of practically identical idiolects, nor ambiguity, nor vague communication, nor literary and poetic effects; yet it is precisely these aspects of communication which most interest literary and critical theorists. Consequently, inadequacies in the code model have grave implications for those theories which assume its validity.

We might expect that theories based on the assumptions of classical rhetoric would adopt the code model, while those in the romantic tradition would reject it. In fact, theorists representing all shades of the classical/romantic spectrum accept the code model of communication. Those roughly corresponding to the classical tradition argue that, if the code model of communication is correct, then there can be only one meaning (intended or otherwise) to any work, and that the reader's job is to identify and duplicate that meaning. Those in the romantic tradition argue that the codes actually produce meaning. They explain ambiguities, vague communication and poetic effects (from metaphor, personification, metonymy and so forth) by arguing that the codes themselves are constantly in flux. On this view, it is not only that the codes possessed by any two readers are not identical; the codes used in two readings of the same work by the same reader are not identical either. In this way, the romantic approach adapts the code model to its purpose.

It could be thought that theorists in the romantic tradition would have nothing to do with the code model of communication. However, nothing in the writings of the early romantics rules it out; and with the fusion of rhetoric with semiotics (through the adoption of the work of Saussure by the structuralist critics), it became impossible to divorce the two. In fact, most contemporary critics assume that the literary work consists of codes of some kind. So completely has the code model been accepted that it is now a commonplace for critical and literary theorists to speak of coding, and codes, in an increasingly metaphorical

sense.[8] The most extreme current romantics, such as particular post-structuralists who deny the existence of original meaning, bolster their arguments by appeal to the code model.

Both uses of the code model have their attractions. For those in the classical tradition, the code model points of the existence of literal meaning; given this, it is easy to think of tropes and figures of speech as more or less codified deviations from literal meaning, as defined by the code. For those in the romantic tradition, the constant "evolution" of codes explains why no two readings of any literary work are ever identical; and by shifting the source of meaning to the codes themselves, and away from the writer, they have principled grounds for the exclusion of authorial intention, and the admission of literary and poetic effects clearly unforeseen by the writer.

However, the code model of communication, even at its most refined (Peirce 1932, Barthes 1977, Eco 1984) does not really support any of these positions. It does not distinguish between sentence and utterance, and therefore cannot accommodate or explain the role of context in communication. It was precisely these considerations that led Grice to develop an alternative, inferential model of communication.[9] It is interesting that even in Gricean accounts of interpretation, where inference plays such a crucial role, the classical view of figures of thought and figures of speech is retained. Gricean pragmatics describes metaphor, for example, as a violation of the first Maxim of Quality (truthfulness). This "violation", or deviation from a norm of literal truthfulness, is resolved by inference: the reader (or hearer) searches for some interpretation which satisfies the governing principle of communication, the Co-operative Principle. In this way, Grice combines a classical view of figurative language with an inferential account of interpretation as a whole.

However, as Sperber and Wilson have argued (1986a: 21-38; see also Wilson and Sperber 1988b, 1986a), the details of Grice's inferential account of interpretation are unsatisfactory, and need to be changed. The fundamental objection points to the problem which critical and literary theorists have run up against: problems of constraint. Although,

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[8] They will use the term, for instance, to mean social and personal conventions, linguistically encoded information, patterns or relationships set up within a text, authorial biases and cultural mores.

[9] The role of inference in communication has been acknowledged almost from the outset by semiotics. More recently, Eco's notion of "inferential walks" (Eco 1976) and Culler's of "literary competence" (1981) have explicit recourse to inference in response to the deficiencies of the code model. In each case, however, inference plays a subordinate, unconstrained, and ad hoc role in an overall decoding process that is never fully explained.

in retrospect, the (correct)[10] interpretation of an utterance or work may seem "inevitable", it is not enough to show how it might have been arrived at: we need to show other interpretations were *not* chosen. In theory, an utterance may give rise to an almost unlimited set of possible interpretations, and Gricean pragmatics - like other current critical and literary theories - cannot explain the process by which the reader chooses one interpretation over another.

In this section, I have tried to show that virtually all current (and past) literary and critical theories are, whatever their other differences, united in their acceptance of some version of the code model of communication. Whether explicit, as in post-structuralist thought (and in fact in all theories from which current post-structuralist thought is derived), or implicit, as in the case of reader-response theory and new criticism, the acceptance of the code model of communication is universal. In the next section, I would like to look at some of the problems that arise out of this assumption.

7. Problems in current accounts of interpretation

There are many problems with current critical and literary theories. While there have been genuine contributions to specific areas, there has been little or no progress on fundamental issues in literary studies. Stylistics is a flourishing branch of study, but stylisticians have not clarified the basic processes at work (see Short 1989).[11] Reader-response theory increasingly concentrates on interpretive strategies, rather than on the basic issues of communication and interpretation (see Bonnycastle 1994). Deconstructive interpretive strategies, while they shed light on specific interpretations of individual works have increasingly turned away from literature and to the examination of culture in general (see Fish (1989: 308) for his application of deconstruction to the practice of law; and Nerhot 1990).

In fact, none of the approaches I have sketched above has shed much light on the

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[10] This description applies primarily to conversational utterances, of course, where the speaker may confirm or deny her audience's interpretation of what she has said. But there is no reason why the same general principle, of intended interpretation, cannot apply to literary works, as I will argue in more detail throughout this thesis.

[11] Chapters 2 and 3 address some of these problems, and provide a relevance-theoretic approach.

nature of literary communication. It may be because of this that some writers now claim that critical and literary theory is fully the creative equal of literature, and ought to be treated as such in its own right. In the meantime, the majority of teachers and readers of literature remains largely unaffected by these developments.

Traditional criticism - the kind widely taught in schools and outside specialised critical theory courses - actually continues many of the strategies of the classical tradition. For most teachers of literature, there is usually just one acceptable interpretation for any text; or at least, all interpretations must fall into a relatively narrow spectrum of possible responses. This assumption has little or no theoretical basis: indeed, it is more often a matter of control than anything else. Most teachers are good if not necessarily sophisticated readers; they have justifiable confidence in their interpretive abilities, and resent a challenge from their students or non-specialists. Most students quickly learn the range of acceptable behaviour. They also accept the given interpretation because they generally recognise the teacher's expertise, and are incapable of producing equally satisfactory interpretations on their own.

For the vast majority of situations in which literary interpretation are actually taught, the questions that arise are resolved not on the basis of "well thought out" theoretical positions, but as a matter of teaching style. Teachers who encourage independent exploration by their students will tend not to believe in, or pay attention to, a literal or intentional meaning. Their purpose is to encourage autonomous problem-solving, and so they usually permit a wide latitude as their students acquire the skills of literary interpretation.[12] Those who are less confident of their skills or authority may tell their students to find the "literal meaning" of a text as a prelude to discovering the one correct meaning, or at least *a* correct meaning. These teachers are often inclined towards historical criticism, and though they insist that their students pay attention to the formal aspects of a work, they suggest that all roads ultimately lead to an authorised interpretation. Most teachers of literature thus take the generalised classical approach, with a typically romantic attention to the connection between

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[12] Note, however, that however much they may encourage such exploration on their students' part, they themselves will generally believe in the validity of their own interpretations. They may not quarrel with their students' conclusions, but they do not usually adopt them either. And of course, incompetent teachers who cannot challenge their students' interpretations may take very much the same approach as these more experimental and confident instructors.

meaning and form. The fallback position, so to speak, is still the classical approach.

My point is that critical and literary theories have barely affected the teaching of the skills of literary interpretation in the world of the classroom. This is because nothing in any of these theories has been able adequately to describe what those skills are, or even what qualities mark off the literary text. The insuperable problem faced by every theory of literary criticism has been the nature of the literary text, and of the interpretive process. If they cannot provide insight into these fundamental issues, then it's no wonder they have not affected the teaching of literature.

To lay the blame for this failure on the adoption of the code model of communication may seem disproportionate. But I have argued that regardless of theoretical stance, nearly every writer in the area of literary and critical studies has adopted the code model of communication. Since this alone unites them, it seems reasonable enough to investigate whether this also is connected to the general failure of the programme of twentieth-century literary and critical theory. It is in the code model of communication, in fact, that I locate the fundamental difficulty facing all current theories of literature. This thesis, while it is not concerned with any one critical or literary theory, addresses the weakness I believe to be common to all. In relevance theory, I will argue, we have the basis for an adequate theory of communication, and an adequate account of literary interpretation. It is to the main arguments of the thesis, on communication, literary interpretation, and poetics effects, that I now turn.

Chapter One:
Literary interpretation

> Most critical dogmas, preconceptions of the kind that can be and are applied to poetry, have almost exactly the intellectual standing and the serviceableness of primitive "superstitions". They rest upon our desire for explanation, our other desires, our respect for tradition, and to a slight degree upon faulty induction. Sometimes, by good fortune, they are useful; on the whole they make us much more stupid than we would be without them. I A Richards (1929: 282)

1. Introduction

We often fail to realize that most critics and theorists of literature do not know what they mean by literary interpretation. Critics, theorists, teachers and students have many ideas about literary interpretation, but they rarely look at them closely, or go to the trouble of defending them. This may seem surprising, but it is fairly easy to explain. Few critics and theorists outside the fields of linguistic literary criticism, speech act theory, or stylistics are required to make their fundamental ideas explicit. As a result, few ever do. Nevertheless, a discussion of these ideas is necessary to any understanding of the process of reading critically, and to serious evaluation of literary and critical theories of interpretation.

Literary interpretation and the spontaneous interpretation of the common reader are not the same, though I will argue that they are intimately related. It is the business of literary critics and theorists to distinguish between them, and to investigate the nature and value of the first. Their investigations have taken place within a variety of frameworks: critics have looked to psychology, semiotics, linguistics, sociology, and philosophy to help them clarify the difficulties which literary works and interpretations present. I propose to use relevance theory because I believe that an account of literary interpretation is best placed within a general theory of communication and cognition. I will try to show that literary interpretation is a special case of the interpretive strategies used in spontaneous comprehension, rather than a deviation from them.

Relevance theory seems especially promising for this purpose for several reasons. First, it claims to deal with the whole of communication, which includes the area of literary interpretation. Second, within the domain of verbal communication, it addresses the nature of utterance interpretation in general: that is, it examines how we get from utterance to

understanding. In developing the theory of relevance, Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986a) draw on linguistics, philosophy, psychology and rhetoric. Relevance theory therefore encompasses many of the disciplines which have been resorted to by other critics and students of literature, but it has the advantage of bringing these separate domains together in a principled way.

Relevance theory has shed light on spontaneous comprehension. I hope to show that it is equally pertinent to literary interpretation. I will argue that the application of relevance theory to the problem of literary interpretation will prove useful and illuminating. I will not be proposing a new theory of reading; instead, I will be trying to account for a variety of intuitions about literature and literary interpretation.

I will begin in Chapter 1 with a short description of literary interpretation, and sketch the issues I want to discuss. This will be followed by a brief account of relevance theory, indicating the areas in which it can throw light on the issues I have raised. In Chapter 2, I discuss the nature of vague or indeterminate communication, which is particularly common in literary works. I will then consider how relevance theory affects our understanding of "foregrounding", and demonstrate the validity of the resulting approach by looking at two common rhetorical devices, repetition and irony. Finally, I return to the initial question - what is a literary interpretation? - by discussing literariness and classicality in relevance-theoretic terms. I will consider what can be said to constitute a canon, and whether we can advance principled reasons for our judgements about what works belong in the canon, and what works do not. Throughout the thesis, I hope to show the usefulness of relevance theory both to discussions of rhetoric that are concerned with the general nature of literature and literary interpretation, and in the critical interpretation of specific works.

I will take my examples from a variety of literary works, both poetry and prose, and from a variety of periods, for two main reasons. First, it is not enough to show that relevance theory can guide and illumine the critical process when applied to a single work. It could be argued that any success of relevance theory in this case may be because of the peculiar nature of the work. Second, if relevance theory is valid, it must describe a set of general cognitive and communicative principles, not merely strategies which are limited to critics and academics, or to a specific society, literary tradition, or culture. So, most of the examples are taken from works which are well-known and read by both professional and amateur readers. Relevance theory can be useful not only in the interpretation of works which are seldom

resorted to except for the production of literary and scholarly papers, but in the interpretation of those texts that continue to attract both academic and common readers. These works offer the immediate pleasure of reading as well as the more sustained pleasures of critical examination.

Before going further, I should clarify the notion of literary interpretation we will be working with. This will lead to a consideration of its relation to the (literary) text, and of how literary interpretations are evaluated.

2. Describing literary interpretation

The term "literary interpretation" can mean not only an activity but also the product of that activity. In this thesis I will be considering both the process and the product. Let me begin with some claims about literary interpretation as a product.

First, a literary interpretation can be a public (eg, written) or private (mental) representation. In either case, it has conceptual content: in other words, it expresses thoughts, with logical properties. Second, it is constructed by a reader, by some cognitive process. Moreover, the reader is at least partly responsible for the interpretation constructed, and different readers will construct different interpretations. Third, a literary interpretation is an interpretation of something external to the reader - a literary work, poem, story, novel, drama or other text which has qualities that lend it to this kind of interpretation. We can thus say, loosely, that the interpretation "refers to", or "represents" the work. Finally, since interpretation involves constructing a mental representation of an object which has been written by someone, we can assume that the writer is involved in some fashion, and is partly responsible for the result.

A literary interpretation is thus a public or mental representation with conceptual content, made by the reader, of a literary work which the interpretation refers to or represents, and in which the writer is implicated. This innocent description leaves several important issues unresolved. We have no description of the interpretive process, and no idea of the limits of the reader's responsibility in interpretation. We do not know what distinguishes a literary work. We do not know what is involved when a literary interpretation "refers to" or "represents" a literary work, and have no idea of the kind and degree of the writer's involvement in the process. In fact, the description I have given raises precisely those

questions which literary and critical theories try to answer.

I have not yet explicitly argued that literary interpretation differs from common interpretation. Our intuitions and experience tell us that the literary interpretation differs from common interpretations of the same literary work in at least three ways. The first is the degree of acceptability, usually tested by public scrutiny, that we demand of the literary interpretation. Common interpretations of the same work do not need to stand up to public critical examination in this way. The second is the self-consciousness of at least some parts of the interpretive process. Common interpretation of literary works is spontaneous and usually revised or corrected as occasion demands.

The third way in which a literary interpretation differs from a common one is the degree to which the interpretation can accommodate the elements of the work and show their relationship to one another, perhaps to other texts, and to the central concepts of the interpretation. Literary interpretation involves repeated reading of parts or all of the work; the reader will often compare the interpretation with the work and with other interpretations by himself and others, and is often striving to meet standards of coherence, unity, and consistency that are not called for from the common interpretation. While demonstrating a plausible relationship among the many aspects of even a simple literary work is one aspect of interpretation, accounting for all the evidence the work provides is in fact the hallmark of the literary interpretation. An interpretation which fails to show such a relationship is considered weak, or unacceptable, or unsatisfactory.[13] What all three factors have in common is that they demand considerable time and effort from the reader - much greater, usually, than is required for spontaneous comprehension.

Here, too, we are left with more questions than answers. What, for instance, constitutes "acceptability"; where the distinction between spontaneous and self-conscious interpretive processes can be drawn; what is the relationship between effort and interpretation; are all questions which must be addressed in any adequate theory. In this chapter I will concentrate on the first of these issues, acceptability.

3. Acceptability

[13] I should add a cautionary note here. I do not want to imply that literary interpretations can be produced only by professional readers. Any reader can produce a literary interpretation, whether or not that interpretation is actually tested by other readers.

Pettersson (1988) has investigated critical activity by studying the logical status of critics' statements about a work: their "literary interpretations". In this way, Pettersson hopes to come up with standards of acceptability. I will not be adopting Pettersson's approach, but will look in detail at the notion of acceptability that he deals with, and return to questions about the standards involved in literary interpretation in Chapter 4.

Before we look at how Pettersson characterises the various schools of thought about literary interpretation, we should consider examples of what he would count as literary interpretation. He identifies four interpretations of Gray's *Elegy*, and summarises these rather extensively (Pettersson 1988: 30-46). I've appended the parts of his book which include these interpretations, and will take them up again in detail in Chapter 4. For the moment, though, we can look at what Pettersson (and other critics) would probably count as literary interpretation using much briefer examples.

There are obvious differences between the following statements:

(1) In *Hamlet*, the Prince is mad.

(2) Prince Hamlet is mad.

(1) refers to the work, and conveys information about the play. This information may or may not be part of what the writer wanted to communicate; if it is, it may be a mere summary or it may be what we would normally mean by (literary) interpretation - a conclusion derived, partly on the reader's responsibility, from evidence provided by the text. (2) does not refer to the play, but only to the characters in it, and could again be part of what the writer wanted to communicate. One difference between (1) and (2) is that (2) could summarize another character's conclusion about Prince Hamlet, or the interpretation the writer wished the audience to arrive at, or the audience's characterisation of the Prince's behaviour - a characterisation the writer might not have envisaged. On the other hand, (1) can only be constructed by the audience (or in the case of another text that refers to the play, by another writer, or the same writer in another text), since it both refers to the play and characterises the Prince's condition. I shall argue that (1) counts as a legitimate or acceptable literary interpretation *only* if (2) is part of what the writer wished to communicate.[14]

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[14] There is another interesting difference between (1) and (2). Sometimes what the writer wants to communicate *can't* be paraphrased as in (1). Consider a political play that is set is a fictional country but is meant to demonstrate that politics in (say) England at the time of writing is awful. Then part of what the writer wants to communicate might be "Politics in England nowadays is awful", but to paraphrase "In *Hamlet*, politics

(continued...)

What Pettersson and others call an interpretation is often in fact a mixture of description and interpretation. It is quite difficult to identify interpretations (in general, and particularly of large, complex works like *Hamlet*) that are confined only to conclusions derived from evidence presented by the text; most "interpretations", particularly literary interpretations, freely mix description (for example, of the reader's response to the text, of the text's relation to other works, and so on, with actual interpretation (which involves the recognition of a set of assumptions the writer intended the reader to recognise).[15] Kiparsky's survey of possible literary interpretations of Blake's *The Tyger* (Kiparsky 1987: 188-189) provides a good example of the kind of focused interpretation most useful to us here:

> Proposed readings of this poem are quite diverse, and the tiger of the poem has been understood in at least the following ways: (1) the tiger is evil, (2) he is holy, (3) he is both, (4) he is beyond good and evil, and even (5) he is the poem itself. (Kiparsky 1987: 188)

The interpretations mentioned by Kiparsky of Blake's tiger would each crucially affect the reader's interpretation of the entire poem. By themselves, though, they are too underdeveloped to qualify as "literary interpretations" of the entire poem - brief as it is.

Pettersson reduces the many schools of thought about literary interpretation to three, which he describes in the following way.

The Description Model. This claims:

(1) That literary interpretations "are logically analogous to descriptive statements referring for instance to physical objects."

"They are in principle true or false", and apparent incompatibilities among them can be accounted for and eliminated by asserting that "they illuminate different aspects of the works under examination." By calling this the Description Model, Pettersson points out the assumption that underlies it, that the standard of acceptability for interpretations is a kind of

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[14](...continued)
in England nowadays is awful" is useless. We might say that part of what makes a play (or what have you) last is precisely that it communicates a more general range of truths that are precisely *not* restricted to the characters, events and so forth in the play.

[15] The responses recorded and discussed in "Part II. Documentation" of Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929) represent many of the possible combinations of emotional response, evaluation, summary and interpretation that typify most interpretive writing.

absolute fidelity to the writer's intentions.[16]

The Inference Model. This claims:

(2) That literary interpretations, although they refer to the work, "include substantial elements which cannot be reduced to description; they are therefore neither true nor false, but more or less ... `plausible'".

By calling this the Inference Model, Pettersson lays emphasis on the process by which the reader produces the interpretation; this position puts at least some responsibility for the result on the reader.[17]

The Creation Model. This claims:

(3) That literary interpretations "are not referential", for there is no work for them to refer to, prior to (or for that matter, other than) the act of interpretation.

Pettersson calls the Creation Model because "the work is created by the interpretation." At this end of the spectrum, the writer's intentions are of no weight at all, and all responsibility rests with the reader who is free to do what he pleases with the text (Pettersson 1988: 11-13).

These three positions rest on various assumptions about the relation between reader, writer and work. I want to lay out the assumptions in more detail, since every critic or theorist must find himself in one of these camps.

The first position, which represents the claims of objective critics (and essentialist theorists), treats the text as an object like any other in the world, knowledge of which can be acquired and tested. If we take this view literally and in its strongest form, a text can have only *one* valid interpretation: the writer's, which it is the duty of the reader to recover. The second, which many subjective critics would adopt, concentrates on the role of the reader and lays emphasis on the subjective nature of perception. For critics of this school of thought, the text can have a number of valid interpretations - for them, standards of acceptability constitute a critical area of research, for if several readers arrive at different readings, the critic's job is to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each and point out the best among

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[16] Kiparsky (1987) refers to this position as "essentialist", a term adopted by Pilkington (1994, 1992). I will be favouring some aspects of Pilkington's analysis and Kiparsky's arguments in the review of literature and throughout Chapter 4.

[17] This position, it will become clear, is most closely aligned with a relevance-theoretic approach. It is actually resorted to, especially by essentialist critics, when the general theoretical claims of any one account prove inadequate. Eco's introduction of "abduction" (1976: 131-137) into his code model of literary communication is just such an attempt to use inference as a stop-gap in structuralist or semiotic literary theory.

them. Clearly they must identify and agree on a common criterion if their judgements are to have any validity. Critics of the third, or creative position, regard the possibility of knowing anything about objective reality as delusive. They claim that the reader alone creates meaning. Whether there is an "original" (or writer's) meaning is beside the point. The reader cannot gain objective knowledge; he is only tenuously capable of subjective perception. It might seem that here there are no standards of acceptability at all.

It is thus possible to categorize critical theoretical viewpoints fairly simply by looking at the way they regard the writer, the reader and the work. I want to argue now that even critics of the third type accept the need for some criteria of acceptability. Even in the free play on the text that deconstructionists practise there are standards of acceptability, and so some criteria which lead the critic to accept some interpretations and reject others. These criteria are in fact usually interpretive frameworks, more or less unique to the critic and defended on utilitarian, philosophical, or political grounds. In all their approaches, some standards of acceptability are nevertheless required. We should consider some specific cases to see how these standards operate. To demonstrate that standards of acceptability are both universally and consistently (if unconsciously) applied, I will consider both literary and non-literary works.

A E Housman's poem *To An Athlete, Dying Young* is often anthologized, and so students of English literature are regularly asked to write essays on it which amount to fledgling literary interpretations. The poem goes as follows:

(4)

The time you won your town the race,
We chaired you through the market-place;
Man and boy stood cheering by,
As home we brought you, shoulder-high.

Today the road all runners come
Shoulder-high we bring you home.
And set you at your threshold down,
Townsman of a stiller town.

Smart lad, to slip betimes away
From fields where glory does not stay;
And early though the laurel grows,
It withers quicker than the rose.

Eyes the shady night has shut
Cannot see the record cut;
And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has shut the ears.

Now you will not swell the rout
Of lads that wore their honours out;
Runners whom renown outran,
And the name died before the man.

So set, before its echoes fade,
The fleet foot on the sill of shade,
And hold to the low lintel up
The still-defended challenge-cup.

Then round that early-laurelled head
Will flock to gaze the strengthless dead;
And find unwithered on its curls
The garland briefer than a girl's.

In one essay on this poem, a college student of mine wrote that the athlete of the poem, tiring of the empty adulation of the crowds, had decided to hang up his shoes and pursue a quieter life. This is, of course, wrong; the interpretation would be rejected by virtually all careful readers of the poem, all of whose interpretations would include the assumption that the athlete referred to is dead.

As I indicated, it is not just "literary" works that suffer from misinterpretation. The editors of *The Annotated Mother Goose* discuss a nineteenth-century critic, John Bellenden Ker, who read into every nursery rhyme deep political and religious meanings. He claimed that "There was an old woman lived under a hill", for example, described in cryptic and symbolic terms the Roman Catholic Mass, and was seditious in the extreme. His interpretation, like that of my student, would be rejected by most readers.[18]

One misinterpretation is the work of a beginner, and his error could be ascribed to a

[18] See Baring-Gould and Baring-Gould (1967, 1962: 12-15). They also mention a twentieth-century critic, Katherine Elwes Thomas, who believed nursery rhymes were covert political satires. Ker's and Thomas' "overzealous" habit of "reading meaning into rhymes where no meaning was ever intended" is recorded in numerous citations from their work throughout the book.

lack of expertise. The other, however, by a published and apparently credible author, cannot be accounted for this way; his unacceptable interpretation could perhaps be explained as the result of some sort of mania. But explaining away these individual misinterpretations in personal or psychoanalytical terms is inadequate for several reasons (apart from the fact that neither is *interesting*, in the sense that neither adds to our understanding of the work or the mechanisms of literary interpretation).

First, although these interpretations are spectacularly wrong, such failures are not uncommon. Second, talk of "lack of expertise" begs the question of *what* expertise is involved; and "mania" likewise sidesteps the problem of how aspects of an individual's mental state can seriously distort some parts of the interpretation (the poem's subject) while leaving others intact (grammar). Third, and most important, this type of explanation ignores the *process* by which readers of these poems reject the unacceptable ones. I should add that critics holding any of the views described by Pettersson and summarized above would also reject these interpretations, so we cannot claim that these types of interpretations are acceptable to one faction and so rejected by another. In both cases, and on all three approaches, the interpretations are unacceptable: they are just *wrong*.

It is precisely the fact that some critics and readers produce (literary) interpretations that are rejected by virtually all other readers that Pettersson addresses in his study of four critical approaches to Gray's *Elegy*. His discussion of the logical status of literary interpretations is designed to shed light on the ways in which critics and readers accept some readings and reject others. Regardless of the means by which interpretations are rejected, the fact of rejection means that some standards are at work. We should consider the implications of this conclusion.

Standards imply strategies for arriving at a satisfactory interpretation and criteria for evaluating the result; but most attempts to formulate strategies and criteria for literary interpretations have failed. This in turn has been taken by some to mean that the whole enterprise of looking for standards in interpretation should be abandoned. However, it may simply mean that we have been looking for the wrong thing. Suppose, for example, we take the objective critical position, and claim that *only* interpretations identical with the writer's intended message will do. Suppose, furthermore, we assume that every writer has a determinate message to communicate. Then we have a goal which may or may not be reasonable (reconstructing the writer's intentions), but a conception of the goal (the

production of an interpretation identical with a determinate interpretation intended by the writer) that makes it virtually impossible to expect success. The very fact that there are variations, even slight ones, among interpretations of a simple poem (such as Housman's), and no obvious way of choosing between them, would suggest that no one interpretation could ever be fully acceptable. Moreover, the fact that writers often have vague intentions, or make different claims about their intentions on different occasions, is an argument against the determinacy thesis. Further implications of indeterminacy in communication will be followed up in the next chapter.

As I will argue, there is a standard which we can - and do - use to decide among interpretations: consistency with the principle of relevance. The argument for this criterion has still to be made; and groundwork still needs to be done before we can see why no other criterion is adequate. For now, we should merely refrain from making rigid assumptions about the writer's intentions. The fact that they may be more or less determinate now becomes something else that a theory of literary interpretation, like a theory of spontaneous comprehension, must accommodate and explain.

4. Standards in literary interpretation

4.1 Evidence

We can make a couple of assumptions, however. The first I have already proposed: that some literary interpretations are unacceptable. The second I have also proposed: that the existence of unacceptable interpretations implies some standards of assessment. I am going to add a third assumption: that evidence plays a part in the acceptance or rejection of literary interpretations. In this section, I will consider some of the types of evidence that are used in literary interpretation, and how the use of this evidence might be constrained.

Kiparsky highlights the connection between evidence and interpretation in a way that we should bear in mind when considering what constitutes literary interpretation. He argues against the position that there are no facts in critical disputes, only contending interpretive frameworks. On the contrary, he points out, "interpretations [do not] mysteriously *create* those facts. What they do is to call attention to the facts, and to give them a specific significance" (Kiparksy 1987: 188). Although the "significance might be noticed only because of a proposed interpretation", and "different interpretations [may] account for

different sets of facts" (Kiparsky 1987: 188), the problem of acceptability of literary interpretations cannot be got round by asserting that there are no facts either to be accounted for or argued from. Kiparsky's own brief argument for the third interpretation of *The Tyger* (the tiger is both good and evil) is based on evidence provided by the poem; by the cycle in which the poem occurs (*Songs of Experience*) and its relation to an earlier, related poem cycle (*Songs of Innocence*); and by Blake's well-documented metaphysical idealism (Kiparsky 1987: 188-189).[19]

Kiparsky characterises this kind of argument as "very much like marshalling evidence for a theory in some empirical field of enquiry" (Kiparsky 1987: 189). We should bear in mind this suggestion that interpretation and evidence are intimately related, for I will argue for a relevance-theoretic approach to understanding literary interpretation from just such a connection.

It seems clear that evidence helps the reader discriminate among interpretations. As common interpretive (and critical) practice demonstrates (see Pettersson, above and Appendix B) argues, interpretations are *derived* from the evidence provided by a work; furthermore, varying interpretations can be partly evaluated by the *degree* to which they account for all the evidence of the work in a way that is plausible. Nevertheless, there are limits to the evidence provided by a text, and most interpretations go far beyond that evidence. Most of the poor, weak or wrong interpretations produced by students result from just such "going beyond" the evidence, rather than from their failure to use the evidence explicitly given and understood.

What is "evidence", and what is it evidence for? Typically, a piece of evidence is a clue which, when combined with further assumptions, supports a certain conclusion. For example, the fact that Jane is putting on her coat, combined with the further assumption that you put on your coat when you're about to go outside, supports the conclusion that Jane is about to leave. It does not *entail* this conclusion: Jane might be putting on her coat in order to see what it looks like in the mirror. Typically, evidence points in several directions, and the interpretation of evidence is itself an art, which involves deciding which conclusion is

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[19] Readers who consult the appended excerpt from Pettersson (1988) will notice that he takes this approach to interpretive practice for granted. His summaries of the variant readings, and especially his evaluations of their relative worth, demonstrate typical critical practices, which examine both text and interpretation in the light of how well they are supported by, or illuminate, the evidence of the poem (or the poem's context, or the poet's belief system).

best supported by the evidence.

Kiparsky's suggestion is that literary interpretations should be evaluated using all the available evidence, from the work itself, from related works, from the poet's life and history and culture of the times, and that its use should be constrained only by the general standards of scientific enquiry. Other approaches are more restrictive, as regards both the range of evidence to be used, and how it is to be used. One might argue, for example, that the only relevant evidence is that provided by the work itself: every work stands on its own and should be divorced from related works, from the history of the writer and the culture of the times in which it was produced. This raises the question of what the evidence provided by the work is evidence *for*.

Here I would like to contrast a range of positions, each of which implies a different conception of evidence and the constraints on its use.

Position 1

The only acceptable interpretations are those encoded in or entailed by the work itself. On this approach, the "evidence" provided by the work is not about the writer's intentions, but about, precisely, what we should take to be the propositions encoded and entailed. On this approach, the work is paramount, and what the reader and writer can add to the interpretation is minimal or non-existent.

Position 2

The only acceptable interpretations are those intended by the writer. On this approach, the "evidence" provided by the work is about the writer's intentions, and it is the writer's intentions, as evidenced by the text, related works, the life of the poet and the general history and the culture of the time that are paramount in interpretation.

Position 3

Any interpretation is acceptable, provided it is compatible with propositions entailed or encoded by the work. On this approach, the "evidence" provided by the work, as in Position 1, bears solely on what is entailed or encoded, and the reader is free to build in anything else he fancies. Here the reader's tastes are paramount; the text plays a minimal constraining role, and the writer's intentions are devalued.

I want to argue for Position 2, on which the "evidence" for a literary interpretation bears on the writer's intentions. I will try to show, however, that in interpreting this evidence, the reader can do more than merely follow the canons of scientific enquiry. In literary

interpretation, as in spontaneous comprehension, there is a set of special-purpose principles which can be used to sift alternative hypotheses and choose the one that is best supported by the available evidence. Before doing this, however, I have to dispose of the alternative view, shared by Positions 1 and 3, and that "evidence" provided by the work is independent of the writer's intentions, and bears solely on what is encoded or entailed. I will start by showing how literary interpretation goes well beyond the propositions encoded and entailed, using Housman's *To An Athlete, Dying Young* as an example.

The explicit content of *To An Athlete, Dying Young* can be summarized as follows: The unnamed speaker tells us that the athlete, a young man, publicly successful and admired in his home town, has died "young". The speaker calls him a "smart lad" to have died while his achievements are still unsurpassed by others and undimmed by the passage of time. The speaker goes on to imagine the athlete arriving in the land of the dead (apparently modelled on the afterlife of classical mythology) where the dead gather about the newcomer to admire the symbol of his earthly victories, the crown of laurel. Since no time passes in this land, the laurel looks unwithered, and the athlete's "shade" is in the peak of his condition. This brief summary covers the bulk of what is explicitly expressed in the poem.

Any interpretation of the poem, however, goes beyond this explicit content by drawing inferences from it, or by using background knowledge. The general reader often assumes that the dead athlete's symbol of victory will continue "unwithered" in the land of shades, but this is nowhere stated. Yet, for many readers, the poignancy of the poem rests exactly on the contrast between the athlete's physical death and his immortal youth: the paradox that in premature death the young man has found eternal youth arouses complex emotional and intellectual responses.[20] Furthermore, even modest readings of the poem go beyond what is explicitly asserted. I will argue that *all* utterance interpretation, and hence, all literary interpretation, goes beyond what is explicitly stated.

Relatively straightforward interpretations of the Housman poem come readily to mind. We may believe that the poem points out the paradox that death alone can preserve youth and victory; that the relationship between time, triumph and the young is a curious one;

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[20] Consider the myth of Eos and Tithonus: Tithonus is given eternal life, but not eternal youth, so that his immortality becomes an intolerable burden. Housman's poem neatly reverses the situation of this myth, for the athlete achieves eternal youth by giving up life altogether. His immortality, like Tithonus', is assured, but may not necessarily be considered a burden.

that early death, while it is tragic at one level, is at another a positive advantage for it prevents the lingering decline of fame and ability. None of these interpretations is particularly obscure or difficult; they have probably turned up in countless freshman essays since the poem was published. There are two features that are worth noting, though: none of them is especially controversial (for despite their differences, they are all more or less acceptable); and all of them go far beyond the evidence of the poem, both as I have summarized it and as a quick check of the text will confirm.

In the next three sections, I will illustrate these ideas further, concentrating in turn on the three main factors in interpretation listed above: the text, the reader and the writer. At the same time, I want to argue for one of the central ideas of this thesis: that producing interpretations, on the one hand, and evaluating them, on the other, are not two separate processes, which can be studied in isolation from each other. In fact, the easier an interpretation is to produce (or the easier it might have seemed to the writer for the reader to produce), the more acceptable it will be.

4.2 The work

If we assume that there are two separate and unrelated activities at work in producing and evaluating a literary interpretation, we make it impossible to get at the factors which lead to our accepting or eliminating an interpretation. The work may provide clues (evidence) which point us in many different directions. Despite this, we do not produce interpretations that include all these different interpretive directions; rather, an interpretation is based on just one of the many available to us. We need to be able to say something about *how* these hypotheses (ie, possible interpretation) are produced, how they discriminate among the variety of possible interpretive directions available, and how - once constructed - they are evaluated. It will turn out that facts about how easy or difficult it is to produce these will directly affect how they are evaluated (see below, sections 7-8, and Chapter 2).

Some critics (as shown above) have argued that the work is the sole determining factor in interpretation. I would like to suggest that this is because they have wrongly assumed that the text *encodes* all the information the reader needs to reach the correct interpretation. It could be claimed, for example, that a set of explicit statements are encoded and require no inferential work on the reader's part to recover. However, there are several aspects of any text which show that this claim is not correct.

To demonstrate this is to demonstrate the major role played by context or background assumptions in *all* aspects of interpretation, and thus to show that *all* interpretation, however narrowly construed, involves going beyond the text. Purely "text-bound" approaches to interpretation will never be adequate on their own.

The text, of course, imposes important linguistic constraints on possible interpretations. Failure to grasp these can lead to misinterpretation. For example, a student essay on Drayton's sonnet *Since there's no help, come, let us kiss and part* was based on a misreading of the grammar of the phrase "Passion speechless lies". Being unable to parse this phrase to her satisfaction, yet realising its importance to the sense of the poem, she constructed a sentence, and then an interpretation, around it. Her essay claimed that the poem, which described the end of a relationship, pointed out the dangers of relying entirely on sex as the basis for a relationship. She asserted that the two people in the poem (the speaker and the addressee) never talked to each other: instead, they had sex all the time; and on the few occasions when they did talk, they lied to each other.

This novel and erroneous interpretation of the poem was based on a failure to parse correctly a clause that turned out to be the key to this student's interpretation. Here the student could not properly disambiguate the lexical item "lies" because she was misled by the S-SC-V structure of the line. She interpreted both the subject and the verb as noun phrases; her interpretation represents the attempt to make sense of an anomalous grammatical construction. This interpretation was inadequate for purely linguistic reasons. Thus, we can take the linguistic aspects of the work as part of the evidence which allows us to decide in some simple cases which interpretations are unacceptable.

When we talk about "evidence" in this connection, we mean, precisely, evidence that one or another dialect, or lexical item, or grammatical construction, was being used, and hence that one or another interpretation was linguistically encoded. As this example shows, even at this strictly linguistic level, there is room for doubt, and background assumptions (for example, about the dialect the writer was using) must be brought into play if one interpretation is to be preferred.

Continuing my argument that the work is never the sole determinant of an interpretation, notice, next, that ambiguous words often occur in literary texts. Moreover, we often succeed in disambiguating (choosing one meaning rather than the other) without our choice being determined by the surrounding words or text. At the conclusion of Charlotte

Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, for instance, the narrator says "Now why should that man have fainted?" though she is clearly, in context, referring to her husband, whom she has called by name ("John") or, where appropriate, "he". The same is true of names such as "Mary", referential expressions such as "the man", and pronouns as "he" or "she". Henry James is notorious for using pronouns whose interpretation is not obvious from the surrounding text, as in a chapter from *The Ambassadors* (James 1960: 287-295), where the narrator is forced into a variety of awkward references to proper names throughout, whenever the confusion of pronouns threatens to become serious.

The point of these examples is to show that even in establishing what is actually "stated" rather than implied by a work, a substantial element of interpretation and inference is involved. What is encoded by a text - even once the grammar or dialect is fixed - rarely amounts to a unique set of unambiguous propositions. The reader has to come to some decision, using clues provided in the text, and interpreting them in the light of background assumptions, plus some standard for deciding what makes one interpretation acceptable and another not. Here, presumably most people would agree that the writer's intentions as to the correct disambiguation or reference assignment are paramount, and that evidence bearing on those intentions needs to be considered.

Notice, next, that it is possible to reject an interpretation even if it does not contradict what is explicitly stated in a work. For example, if an interpretation squares with this explicit content, and is a linguistically possible reading of the text, but contradicts our knowledge of the world, we will normally reject it. An interpretation of Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* that asserts that Twain wrote this novel to stop the slave trade in the United States is wrong. Although the novel is set in the antebellum American South, our knowledge of the world (and incidental evidence provided by the writer in a brief note on setting) tells us that by 1885, the institution of slavery had been abolished. An interpretation that claims Mark Twain wanted to eradicate an institution that was dead twenty years at the time his novel was published is made unacceptable by our knowledge of the world and our belief that Mark Twain and his contemporary audience was aware that slavery had been done away with.

Notice that, in order to arrive at this conclusion, we have to make some assumptions about the writer: for example, that he was aware of what was going on around him, and was rational enough not to want to destroy something that had already disappeared. Here, as in disambiguation and reference assignment, not only background assumptions but reference

to the writer's intentions must be used to eliminate the unacceptable interpretation.

Consider another example in which it is possible to reject an interpretation that does not contradict the explicit content of a poem. Ker's symbolic reading of the nursery rhyme does not contradict anything explicitly stated in the poem. In order to reject it, we therefore have to appeal to something other than the explicit content of the poem. The problem is to decide at which point an interpretation that does not contradict the explicit content of the text is nonetheless insufficiently supported by it. And so we are back to where we started. We have to assume that there is some standard with which the evidence provided by the text will interact and cause us to accept or reject an interpretation.

Let's consider a misinterpretation of the Housman poem that runs along the same lines as the Ker example. In the same class that produced the interpretation on which the athlete was alive and well (if disillusioned), a student submitted an essay that claimed that Housman had written a strongly anti-war poem. The student granted that the athlete was dead, but assumed that he had died in battle. The poem pointed out the waste of a young man's life in the senselessness of war, so this student believed. If we start with absolute certainties, that is, what is explicitly entailed by the text, we know that the athlete is dead. But nothing has been positively said about the manner of his death, and perhaps we are not constrained to believe one thing over another. There is an infinity of possibilities in any statement: how much more in what is left unsaid, and which we can fill up as we please.

At this point I want to add a word of caution. We should resist the temptation to insist on all-or-nothing decisions of the type cited above. In the complex relationship between reader, writer and work, there will be points at which different factors assume major importance. To deny that any one of these is the sole foundation for interpretation is not to deny that it plays a crucial role. For too long, critics have acted as though only one aspect of the relationship is important; too often, critics have ignored the complex interplay of features in their attempt to produce a unified theory of interpretation.

If we rule out the text as the sole determining factor in interpretation, then we will need to consider the roles of the reader and the writer. Since it is the reader, not the writer who interprets, let's turn next to the role of the reader in interpretation, and in decisions about acceptability.

4.3 The reader

A good deal has been said about the role of the reader, and not all of it is useful. I want to be clear about the limits of this discussion. We are here investigating the "fact that some interpretations are considered more satisfactory than others, and some downright unacceptable" and that not "all interpretations are of equal value" (Pettersson 1988: 77). I am trying to find the standards by which interpretations are evaluated, and by beginning as I have done with the one certainty - the text - I hope to move cautiously into areas of psychology and cognition.

We have already tested the limits of the work in recognizing the limits of what is encoded. Let's see if we can follow our intuitions about the reader's part in the processes of interpretation and evaluation to some more general conclusion. Since, as I have suggested, the processes of interpretation and evaluation are closely related, and since they clearly take place in the reader, it would seem reasonable to assume that the reader has access to the principle(s) of construction and evaluation. Reader-response theories often assume that the reader is the key to the interpretive process.

The reader is certainly important. What we cannot take for granted, though, is that we can find what we are looking for by *asking* the reader, for he is not necessarily an authority on his own interpretive process. Cognitive processes are notoriously difficult to understand (see Fodor 1983 for a discussion) and are not generally accessible to the person who experiences them. If the reader were an authority on his own interpretive process, then we would only need to ask people how they arrived at their interpretations to understand how utterances and texts are understood. The fact is that although readers' intuitions and experiences are of interest, they are not the last word. Furthermore, we do not observe people's interpretive processes directly, but can only infer them.

When we ask readers and critics to explain the way they arrive at interpretations and how they judge among them, the responses are often in need of evaluation themselves.[21] Very often, the critic's notion of "standard" is really just another idea he holds about the world. So we have critics whose conscious standards are taken from politics, from psychotherapy, from feminism and so on. When they explain what causes them to decide between two interpretations which conform to these "standards", they may talk about such intangibles

[21] Perhaps the classic example of such responses and their evaluation is provided by the "protocols" of I A Richards' *Practical Criticism* (1929).

as "inevitability" or "coherence" or "aesthetic value", to mention a few. What they are reporting, of course, is their own sense of satisfaction with the interpretation expressed in terms most appropriate to their general ideas and assumptions about the world.

So we have the fact that the actual standards by which interpretations are preferred seem neither to be observable by others nor expressed in helpful terms by the reader himself. Since the kind of behaviour we are studying occurs in all human populations, we might think that observing a group or community of readers would lead us to some answers. However, this line of investigation proves unfruitful, too. There are two reasons for this. First, as I have argued, readers are not authorities on their own interpretive process, so we can only infer that process from the interpretations readers produce and the intuitions they express. Second, and more serious, when we are dealing with communities of readers, we have to recognize that the community's goal is different from the individual reader's.

In spontaneous comprehension, ordinary hearers have some mechanism (generally successful, as far as we know) for recognizing speakers' intentions. This is the most obvious starting point for a theory of literary interpretation, which must at least exploit some of the same mechanisms. In the same way, in literary interpretation, the reader's goal is to recognize the writer's intentions on the basis of the evidence provided by the text. The community's goal, however, is not to recognize the writer's intention, but to recognize works or interpretations of works as "good" or "bad". By this we mean that the community judges which works, or which interpretations, are in line with the community's notions of acceptability *for itself*. Acceptability for the community is really consistency with the community's assumptions about the world; interpretations which include assumptions at odds with these are judged unacceptable. As a result, we end up discussing not human cognition but attitudes and assumptions expressed in culture, history, and politics. Stanley Fish's notion of "interpretive communities" (Fish 1980) is probably the best-known example of this kind of discussion, and of its limitations.

I would suggest then that although the reader is clearly the interpreter, we cannot rely on the reader (or on groups of readers) to solve our problems for us. The reader uses the standards and produces the interpretation, but does not know how he does this, just as he cannot tell us how he understands what is said to him. However, this apparent dead end leads to a significant insight. It seems clear that, as part of the literary interpretation process, the reader is likely to use those spontaneous comprehension processes which it is the main task

of pragmatic theory to describe.

Readers do possess, as part of their spontaneous comprehension abilities, a set of standards which enable them to carry out non-literary interpretation. These abilities allow readers to disambiguate, to assign reference, to interpret metaphor and irony, to recover implicit meanings, and so on. We should expect these abilities to shed some light on literary interpretation. As a great deal of reader-response criticism has demonstrated, merely observing the reader (readers) at work, or observing the relationship between the reader's interpretation and either the work itself or other readers' interpretations, is not illuminating on this issue. All he can do is provide the data around which a theory of spontaneous and literary interpretation must be constructed.

4.4 The writer

The writer would seem essential to any discussion of standards in the interpretation of a work. After all, in many cases - for example, in disambiguation and reference assignment - it is clear that the only acceptable interpretation is the one intended by the writer. In fact, the difficulties associated with attempts to judge literary acceptability based on the writer's intentions have been so frustrating that in recent decades many critics have abandoned the writer altogether. Responding to this dismissal of the writer from considerations about interpretation, Albee complained that too many "rely ... on, to use a Hollywood phrase, `what they can live with'" (Plimpton 1967: 332), rather than attempting to find out what the writer intended. The discussion which follows will illuminate some of the problems associated with using the writer's intention as the criterion for the acceptability of interpretation, and may clarify why it has been largely discredited.

To begin with, most writers are dead and can no longer comment on any interpretation of their work. Without the kind of confirmation that a living writer might be able to supply, it seems that we are left making unverifiable guesses at the writer's intention. There is no shortage of cases illustrating the difficulty of taking this approach to the problem of acceptability in literary interpretation. Consider, for example, the case of Melville's *The Confidence-Man.* There is no agreement about the nature of the Mute, the apparent innocent in "cream-colored" clothing who is the first traveller mentioned on the Mississippi steamboat, the Fidèle. This quiet, humble creature wanders among the "congress" of passengers, displaying fragments from Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians, mutely exhorting the people to

trust, confidence and simple love. Roughly pushed aside, he retires to sleep at the foot of a set of steps where he lies like a drift of snow unexpectedly fallen in May - and as quickly and permanently disappears from the tale, never to be seen or referred to again.

The Confidence-Man consists of a loose series of encounters, and a great deal of philosophical discussion, between various confidence-men and their victims as their ship makes its leisurely way "from apple to orange, from clime to clime"; its destination may be strictly speaking New Orleans, but there is little doubt among many readers that the "company of fools, under a captain of fools, on a ship of fools", is headed straight to Hades. The title, however, indicates that all the confidence-men encountered in the novel are manifestations of the same man. Most readers accept this, interpreting the Confidence-Man's extraordinary gift for transformation as a sign that he is, if not the Devil himself, his chief representative. Among the avatars he assumes, though, the Mute stands out. Melville's descriptions clearly link him not to Satan but to Christ; his innocence, his muteness, his fleecy hair and benevolent air, and - most importantly - the fact that he does not attempt to cheat anyone, set him apart from the remarkable protagonists of the episodes that follow.

Consequently, there are many interpretations of the Mute. He may be the first in the series of disguises taken by the title character, and so be associated with evil; he may be a warning of the advent of the Confidence-Man, and represent absolute goodness; or he may be completely unrelated to the main character, and serve to heighten the thematic contrasts of good and evil, light and dark, truth and falsehood. The question of his nature and purpose in the novel has created a permanently insoluble puzzle, at least partly because the author has been dead nearly a century, and has left no clue in his surviving papers.[22]

Other people have observed that living writers can be of as little help as dead ones. Ezra Pound, for example, often took a contrary view of his works to the majority of his readers, yet his stated intentions did not greatly alter people's interpretations of his work. Then there is Gaddis' reaction to one critic's interpretation of an aspect of *The Recognitions*:

> One critical discussion I read discussed Wyatt [Gwyon, the protagonist]'s first

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[22] Even living writers can be of little help. William Gaddis, replying to an interpretation of *Carpenter's Gothic*, comments:

> But that's simply an implication isn't it? I mean these are areas in my work that I don't care to comment on. I think it says somewhere in *The Recognitions* that you cannot run along after your work saying what I really meant was this or this or this. Generally of all these questions: when I've worked on a book, I've put just as much into it as I wanted to, and if there are ambiguities, well, life is filled with them. (Abádi-Nagy 1987: 74-5)

> job with a bridge building concern which I'd conceived simply to get across his fascination with the idea of tensions, the delicacy of bridges and the tensions that are involved, the idea of strength in delicacy, in tension, but this dissertation ingeniously related his career as bridge builder to his father as pontifex, a priest, the bridge between God and man, and I thought this was marvelous. When I read things like that, I just keep quiet. I think, "Well, if they want to think I'm that clever - fine." (Abádi-Nagy 1987: 74)

These and similar anecdotes make clear the limitations of using the writer's intentions - or at least, a particular kind of intention on the writer's part - as the criterion for acceptability.

In fact, it now appears to be standard practice for writers to say that they "just do the writing" and leave the interpretation to others. The custom of disclaiming responsibility for the effects of what they have written is typical of writers such as Martin Amis. This is, as it were, a capitulation by writers to reader-response theories of interpretation - and subject to the same objections. Martin Amis would have no reason to write second drafts if he didn't care how his works were understood. If a work really were understood as "a collaboration between the reader and what is on the pages" (Gaddis, quoted in Abádi-Nagy 1987: 80), then, as we have seen, neither the reader, nor the text, provides . . . a sufficiently constraining criterion for judging the acceptability of interpretations. We have to assume that the writer has some part to play in this process.

Let us return to our earlier discussion about the connection between interpretation and evidence. In that discussion, I tried to show that the text provides evidence for the intended interpretation. That evidence, we saw, is partly constituted by the explicitly encoded content of the words, phrases, and sentences - the utterances, let us call them - of the text. However, the resulting interpretation invariably goes beyond what is explicitly encoded. Even remaining on the linguistic level, the style of an utterance, the register or dialect chosen, the word order, the choice of one optional construction rather than another, may provide important evidence, even though it strictly speaking *encodes* nothing - no more than does a style of dress or walk. More generally, the reader has to draw conclusions from the evidence provided, based on background knowledge which he himself supplies. Moreover, evidence may point in several directions, and needs to be evaluated in some way that we do not yet understand.

Those critics who have lost faith in writers' intentions have done so because there is

no way of *knowing* what these intentions are. But why impose such an unreasonable demand? Even in spontaneous comprehension - for example in face-to-face conversation - we can never *know* that we have correctly understood the speaker's intentions. Why should we require more certainty from literary interpretation than we do from spontaneous comprehension? The spontaneous comprehension process is a matter of choosing the best hypothesis from a range of conceivable hypotheses, and takes place at a risk. The fact that misunderstandings sometimes occur does not mean that there is no point in trying to communicate at all.

There is more than one reason why this point has been missed. The most obvious is that most theorists are still in the grip of the code model of communication. This guarantees successful communication as long as writer and reader share a code and the signal is not distorted; it guarantees perfect communication, in the sense that the message transmitted will be identical to the one received; and it requires determinacy of intended interpretation: a message is either encoded or it is not. All this goes well beyond what is achievable by literary communication. It has only recently been pointed out that it goes well beyond what is achievable in spontaneous comprehension too.

In pragmatics, the code model has been shown to be inadequate, and abandoned in favour of an inferential model of spontaneous comprehension (see Grice 1989, and Sperber and Wilson 1986a, Chapter 1). This model replaces the certainty of the code model with appeals to evidence and inference, and emphasises the fact that communication takes place at a risk.

We cannot *know* anything about someone else's intentions; all we can do is interpret the evidence she provides. In interpreting literary works we simply make our best guesses about the writer's intentions, based somehow on the evidence she has provided for them. More formally, we do not decode the writer's intentions, but construct and evaluate hypotheses about them. This exactly describes our intuitions and experiences of interpretation. When hypothesis formation and evaluation is the activity we are involved in, then standards for accepting or rejecting hypotheses are precisely what are needed; and those standards are part of the interpretation process itself.

Let us return to the earlier examples of the two unacceptable interpretations of the Housman poem. The first (the athlete is alive and well, if disillusioned), we saw, was ruled out by the explicit content of the poem: the athlete of the poem is dead, and any interpretation

incompatible with this assumption is unacceptable. The second (that the athlete died on the field of battle) is unacceptable because the evidence provided by the poem does not sufficiently support it. We feel intuitively that if Housman did intend us to interpret the poem as a protest against the senseless slaughter of young men in war, he would have provided more evidence than the single phrase "fields where glory does not stay". This phrase, which the student guessed meant "battlefields", is far more likely to mean "playing fields", since the rest of the poem describes either sporting items, events or scenes, or scenes from an imagined land of the dead. We cannot completely rule out the sense "battlefields" on first reading the phrase, or when reading it in isolation. However, our strong intuition is that if Housman had intended us to think about battlefields he would have provided more evidence in the poem along the same lines.

Thus, the standards by which interpretations are evaluated involve text, reader and writer, but in a very particular process. The writer provides evidence for her intentions in the text; that is, she presents evidence that she wants the reader to entertain certain ideas or assumptions. The reader guesses (or *infers*) what those intentions are, based on the evidence provided by her in the work. Where there is a question of what has been intended, or when an interpretation is being evaluated for acceptability - which, we will recall, is one of the hallmarks of the literary interpretation - we examine the available evidence in the light of our standard of evaluation to see which interpretation is most likely to be the one the writer intended us to reach. The primary evidence is still the text itself; however, in literary interpretations we may also consider the evidence left in other works by the writer: other literary works, for example, or commentaries and letters, or historical contextual information which the writer might have assumed her reader would be aware of.

Once the code model is abandoned, one of the main aims of inferential pragmatic theories such as those of Grice and Sperber and Wilson is to isolate the standards of evaluation used by hearers deciding on the intended interpretation in spontaneous acts of comprehension. Here the argument has been that in recognising communicators' intentions a special purpose set of principles is involved. For Grice, these are the Co-Operative Principle and Maxims of truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity; for Sperber and Wilson, it is the Principle of Optimal Relevance. In the next section, I will start to look at how these principles might apply to the interpretation of literary works.

Finally, we should come back to the question of whether the intentions we are

considering are determinate: whether the writer *must* have a single, determinate message in mind. In fact, there is no good reason why this should be so. People communicate all sorts of indeterminate things. A sigh may express a whole state of mind, whose implications would be distorted by any finite attempt to pin it down. Communication models that deal only with determinate messages are inadequate not merely for the interpretation of literature but for ordinary speech, and for non-verbal communication too.

If we consider ordinary speech, we can find any number of examples of indeterminate communication. Suppose Peter asks Mary, "What are you thinking?" and Mary replies by saying "Oh, you know, about life." Here, Mary certainly wants to communicate something, and we all know *roughly* what she has in mind. Certain interpretations of her utterance would be unacceptable: for example, in the absence of future evidence, we would not be entitled to assume that she is thinking about the origins of life, the possibility of life on Mars, the life of a pheasant or an ant. She is thinking about *human* life, in a philosophical rather than a zoological way. Her utterance merely hints at what she is thinking; it gives us an idea of her state of mind. Any adequate pragmatic theory must have something to say about this. Works of literature may be different in degree and richness, but they are not different in kind.

Clearly, indeterminate communication exists in literary works; writers leave all sorts of fairly mundane issues unspecified in even simple poetry. Tennyson's "Fragment" remains attractive to many readers in part because so much is indeterminate; the image of the central character in the poem, which most people assume to be an eagle, is doubtless clear in the minds of the readers, but its clarity is their own invention. We are struck by how much the reader has to supply himself just to make sense of the poem. And what is true for this poem is equally true for longer and apparently more specific works like *Martin Chuzzlewit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. I shall have more to say on indeterminacy below, and it is treated in detail in Chapter 2.

Having made the link between spontaneous and literary interpretation, I want to look in some detail at relevance theory and its implications for the issues raised here. I will then go on to investigate vagueness and indeterminacy in communication. I will follow this with an examination of poetic effects and figurative language, since these have long been thought to contribute literary qualities to a work. Finally, I will come back to the original question of what constitutes a literary interpretation by looking at the notion of literariness, and its implications for classicality and our assumptions about the canon. At that time, I will return

to the variant interpretations of the *Elegy*, discussed by Pettersson, in some detail.

I have suggested that the attempt to recognize the writer's intentions may be the best place to begin our investigation. I have drawn this conclusion from two assumptions. The first is that the interpretation of literary works has the same goal and relies on the same mechanism as that used in spontaneous comprehension. The second is that the goal in both cases is to *recognize* the writer's (or speaker's) intentions.

In what follows I will argue that the standard or criterion for the acceptability of literary interpretations is precisely the same as in spontaneous comprehension. What distinguishes literary from spontaneous interpretation is not the criterion used in evaluating the interpretation, but the amount of time and effort the reader is prepared to put into a literary interpretation, the amount of evidence he is prepared to consider, and the aim of producing an interpretation that is exhaustive, plausible, and unified. All this is warranted by expectations of a compensating richness of reward; that is, we expend extra efforts in constructing literary interpretations because we expect - and are entitled to expect - an interpretation rich enough in effects to be more than worth our while.

5. Relevance: introductory remarks

Kiparsky (1987) re-examines Jakobson's claim that "literature is the province of two theoretical disciplines: *poetics* and *semiotics*" (Kiparsky 1987: 185).[23] He argues that this division motivates the traditional distinction between figures of language (poetics) and figures of thought (semiotics). This division is helpful in so far as it distinguishes the role of pragmatics - which Kiparsky sees as addressing primarily the issues of semiotics - in literary interpretation.

It's important to see pragmatics as being in on the ground floor of literary interpretation, because many of the problems besetting theories of critical practice are the result of assuming that spontaneous utterance comprehension is somehow unrelated to the interpretation of literary works, or the production of literary interpretations. This in turn may be due to a reluctance to consider literature as communication, itself caused by a misunder-

[23] Pilkington examines this division in some detail in his discussion of the connection between literariness and the linguistic properties of texts (Pilkington 1994: 29-46).

standing of the nature of communication and spontaneous comprehension.

Relevance theory is an account of communication that is based on assumptions and arguments about human cognition. Briefly, Sperber and Wilson (1986a) claim that communication involves a global cognitive ability to draw inferences, form hypotheses, and confirm (or disconfirm) them. Communication is a specifically intentional behaviour - that is, it is *intended* to be recognised as providing evidence of the communicator's thoughts - and a communicator may use any and all means at her disposal to provide evidence of her thoughts. Her behaviour draws attention to, or perhaps provides, the evidence on the basis of which her audience will draw the implications, or achieve the effects, or produce the interpretation, she intended.

For this to be so, the evidence provided must rationally support the intended interpretation. A communicator is not free to regard just anything at all as evidence of her thoughts. She must therefore choose appropriate means for communicating her intentions. Where the chosen medium is a text, it must enable a rational interpreter armed with appropriate background assumptions to arrive without difficulty at the interpretation intended. In other words, a literary text *cannot* be rationally understood as meaning anything at all that the reader chooses.

Verbal communication is a special case of inferential communication because, unlike gestures (and other non-verbal communication), language is capable of (partly) encoding propositional content. As Sperber and Wilson put it:

> Linguistic communication is the strongest possible form of communication: it introduces an element of explicitness where non-verbal communication can never be more than implicit. (Sperber and Wilson 1986a: 175)

And literary interpretation, as I have been arguing, is a special case of verbal communication. I will show that the peculiar nature of the literary interpretation is due not to its less explicit character, but to the much wider range of implications which the reader is intended to derive in the course of interpreting a literary work.

Central to an understanding of relevance theory is grasping the relation between effect and effort. Relevance theory claims that human cognition is driven by the search for relevance, which can be defined in terms of two conditions:

(6a) *Extent condition 1*: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.

(6b) *Extent condition 2*: an assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is small. (Sperber and Wilson 1986a: 125)

By "contextual effects", Sperber and Wilson mean the effects that new information can achieve when processed in a context of existing assumptions: namely, strengthening existing assumptions, contradicting and eliminating existing assumptions, or combining with existing assumptions to yield contextual implications, that is, implications deducible from the new information and the context taken together, and from neither new information nor context on its own. Relevance, thus understood, is equivalent to efficiency in altering the individual's existing assumptions - as much as possible, and for as little mental effort as possible.

If cognition is driven by the search for relevance, then we should expect a similar economy in spontaneous comprehension, and, as this thesis argues, in literary interpretation. But the search for relevance in utterance interpretation (communication) is itself constrained by an additional powerful factor.

When human beings communicate, they create an expectation in their audience of a particular kind of relevance: optimal relevance. Optimal relevance, again thinking in terms of effect and effort, is the achieving of adequate effects at minimal processing cost. The first interpretation which satisfied this expectation is the only one which satisfies it: all other interpretations are disconfirmed. Thus, a rational speaker (or writer) will produce her utterance in such a way that the first interpretation which yields adequate contextual effects for no unjustifiable processing effort is the one she intended to convey. In this process, the writer, the reader, and the text are all involved.

It is important to understand that the arguments for relevance theory, and the claims about literary interpretation that follow from it, are to be put in the context, *not* of a discussion of literary theory, but in the wider domain of a theory of communication and understanding. In developing the relevance-theoretic view of communication, I will be addressing most of the issues raised thus far in this thesis; in fact, the only issues left untouched will be those pertaining to the discipline of literature itself. So in what follows I will not yet be looking at what constitutes the literary work, or what distinguishes the literary interpretation from the ordinary interpretation. These questions will be tackled in Chapter 4.

Before turning to the details of relevance theory, I would like to make a few more general remarks. Any text or utterance provides the audience with access to a whole range of conclusions, not all of them intended by the communicator. According to Sperber and Wilson, we can characterise three kinds of information transfer: ostensive-inferential, unintentional, and covert. Their claim is that while all three types of information are governed by the cognitive search for relevance, only ostensive-inferential communication creates in the audience an expectation of *optimal* relevance, which can then guide the interpretation process. Let's consider a couple of examples.

The first and easiest type of information transfer to consider is unintentional information transmission. For example, Lewis Carroll's works suggest the writer's systematic interest in prepubescent girls, and imply a degree of repugnance for little boys. Although these features raise questions about his psychological condition, they were almost certainly not *intended* to be communicated. They should be dealt with alongside other cases of accidental information transmission, under a general theory of cognition. The audience simply picks up relevant information, with no thought for the writer's intentions.

On the other hand, a writer may have covert intentions: that is, intentions to manipulate the audience in some way. This state of affairs is common enough in advertising, say, though relatively unusual in literary works. Imagine a student writing a final exam for my novels course, who has not actually read any of the books she is being asked to write on. Her covert, or hidden intention, is to deceive me into believing that she is perfectly familiar with these works as a result of having done the work required of her in the course. The covert intention is not *supposed* to be detected: at the moment the reader recognizes the writer's intention to deceive, the writer has failed in her task (and in this case, will almost certainly fail her exam). In the usual course of things, and in all ostensive-inferential communication, the writer makes evidence of her intentions available to the reader, who then recovers them through a process of inference governed by the expectation of optimal relevance. In the case of my student, however, the writer is playing a double game; she is making evidence available for a conscious purpose which must remain hidden. Such cases either fall together with accidental information transmission or exploit the mechanisms of ostensive-inferential communication, to which I now turn.

In contrast to these kinds of information transfer - unintended and covert - it is standard in pragmatics (see eg Grice 1989, Sperber and Wilson 1986a) to argue that there is

a further type of overt, intentional communication, in which the writer *wants* her intentions to be recognized and is actively helping the reader to recognize them. The claim is that this type of communication raises expectations in the audience that are not raised by less overt forms of communication, and that interpretations can be evaluated in terms of whether or not they meet the expectations set. It is, in other words, the *expectations* raised by overt, intentional forms of communications, but not by other types of information-transmission, that provide the standard for evaluating possible interpretations. In what follows, I will consider how relevance theory deals with communication of this type.

Relevance theory claims that there are three questions the reader of any work must answer. He must decide what the writer intended to *say*, what she intended to *imply*, and what was her *intended attitude* to what she said and implied. Finding an answer to any of these questions goes far beyond simple linguistic decoding, and involves an element of inference as defined above. I will consider each case in turn.

As noted above (section 4.2, "The work") a good many people in critical theory assume that all that is needed for overt communication to succeed - for the reader to understand the work - is linguistic decoding. However, even a simple example of ordinary communication will show that this cannot be the case.

Consider, first, the question of what is *said*: that is, the statement the writer intends to make. On 6 May 1994, the day the Channel Tunnel was officially opened, the consortium responsible for its construction ran a large ad in *The Independent*. Over a photograph of the Folkestone entrance to the Chunnel was a caption:

(7) We made it.

Our knowledge of English will tell us that this sentence has two possible interpretations; depending on which is chosen, different statements will be made. The advertisers may be saying that the objective of building the tunnel has been reached; or that they are responsible for building the tunnel. The utterance may be intended as an expression of relief, or one of triumph and pride. However, we cannot tell which of these interpretations was intended without performing some form of inference based on non-linguistic evidence.

As (7) makes clear, there is a gap between knowing what a sentence means and understanding what statement the writer intends to make by writing it. I want to begin by considering this gap, and its implications for interpretation.

6. Understanding utterances

6.1 Understanding what is said

Let us look more closely at what is involved in understanding what a writer has said. When we read a sentence, we have to decode the sense of the sentence written, but as (7) shows, some extra inference is then involved in order to decide what statement is being made (in other words, what is "said" in the special sense that pragmatists use; see Grice 1967, Lecture 2). This involves disambiguating any ambiguous expressions; assigning references where appropriate; restoring any deleted or ellipsed parts of the sentence; and narrowing down any parts that are overly vague. (7) above illustrates the problem of disambiguation. We can find examples of the other tasks in the Housman poem.

The first line of the poem includes the words "you" and "your". These words require the reader to decide who the writer is referring to. Most readers assume that the speaker is referring to the athlete of the title, and that this reference is perfectly obvious. We should recognize, though, that there are actually other possibilities (the reader, for example). The final line "The garland briefer than a girl's" is missing the noun in the last noun phrase; the reader has to finish the phrase by answering the question "the girl's *what*?" Again, the "obvious" answer - the girl's "garland" - is not necessarily the only answer the reader can make. The expression "shoulder-high" in the first and second stanzas is actually quite vague. We are not told *how* the athlete has been carried at this height; he may have been carried flat on his back, upside down, backwards, and so on. The fact that we narrow down the possibilities quite quickly does not alter the fact that we do settle on one of the many possible meanings which have to be singled out if the utterance is to make sense. We will have to do even more work before we know the meaning the expression has in a poem about the death of a young athlete. At the end of all this work, though what Housman has said is clearer, we still have to explain how the reader has carried out all these tasks in the way Housman intended.

If our observations are correct, then we must conclude that the idea that decoding alone will establish "what is said" - that is, the proposition expressed - by a work of literature is inadequate. We are left with a different, inferential process, the process of hypothesis formation and evaluation, even at this fundamental level. It is all the more important, then, that we know how this process works.

6.2 Understanding what is implied

Knowing what the writer intended to say is not the end of the story. In some cases it is clear what the speaker intended to *say*, but not what she intended to *imply*. In a scene in Dickens' *Martin Chuzzlewit*, Pecksniff and the landlady of the local pub are discussing her suspicions that a young lady travelling with an elderly gentleman is his mistress.

(8a) "Your suspicion, Mrs Lupin," said Mr Pecksniff gravely, "is very natural." (Dickens 1843-44, 1986: 87)

On the assumption that appearances must lead the observer to conclude that a young unmarried woman, travelling with an elderly gentleman to whom she is in no way related, is his mistress, we reach one possible interpretation. On that reading, Pecksniff's statement merely reassures the landlady that her suspicions do not make her an evil-minded person: they are the inevitable consequence of the young woman's behaviour. However, the narrator has further implications in mind, as he indicates by continuing:

(8b) "...the enemies of this worthy man unblushingly maintained that he always said of what was very bad, that it was very natural; and that he unconsciously betrayed his own nature in doing so." (Dickens 1843-44, 1986: 87)

When Pecksniff calls the landlady's evil suspicions "natural", he implies that this interpretation of the situation is morally neutral and does not compromise the landlady's character. The narrator's comment suggests that Dickens wants to communicate something more. On the assumption that it is Pecksniff's nature that is evil, it is his nature and not the appearances of the situation which lead him to his interpretation of the circumstances. Often, of course, implications of this type, which are manifestly intended by the narrator, are picked up with much less explicit guidance. The question is, how?

In the case of this example from *Martin Chuzzlewit*, there is a small number of obvious implications communicated. However, this is not always so. Quite often, an utterance can communicate something much vaguer. Let's look at two lines from the Housman poem to see how vagueness affects what is implied as well as what is said:

(9) And early though the laurel grows,
It withers quicker than a rose.

This suggests a general line of interpretation, which might be explored in many ways. The comparison makes us think about how soon things (and not just plants) fade and die, but unlike the implications of (8a) there is no following guidance (as in (8b)) to indicate exactly

how the interpretation is to go. As we can see, recognizing the writer's intended implications is also not a matter of simply decoding the sentence uttered, deciding what has been explicitly said, or recovering a well-defined set of determinate implications.

6.3 Understanding attitude

Even when we are clear about what the writer intended to say and imply, we may not be quite sure about her attitude to what she has said or implied. In Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*, two characters, Huck and Aunt Sally Phelps, are discussing a reported explosion on a Mississippi steamer. Aunt Sally is asking Huck about the incident:

(10) "Anyone hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"That's lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt." (Twain 1884, 1966: 291)

The exchange is justly notorious, and often the subject of controversy. It is quite clear what the speakers have said, and what they have implied (whether deliberately or unquestioningly). What is less clear is Twain's intended attitude to his characters' utterances.

We presume that Twain intended the reader to supply the assumption that "being killed" is an extreme form of "getting hurt". Furthermore, we presume that Twain intended the reader to supply the assumption that since Huck has denied that there was "anyone hurt" ("No'm"), and since Aunt Sally is reassured on this point ("That's lucky"), there is no contradiction in Huck's mind between these statements and the statement that a slave was killed by the explosion. We conclude that neither character believes slaves are human beings. This much is clear. What remains unclear is whether Twain intended to endorse these assumptions or whether he had some other attitude in mind, which he expected his readers to adopt.

There are several possibilities. Twain may be exposing the characters' ignorance of the contradiction; he may be counting on the reader's perception of the contradiction; or he may assume that his reader will share the characters' assumptions and so see no contradiction at all. Furthermore, depending on his intended attitude to the statements made by his characters, he may be endorsing their assumptions, rejecting them, questioning them, or holding them up to ridicule. The reader has to decide whether Twain is endorsing his characters' view of the world, distancing himself from it, asserting it as true, and so on.

To sum up, then, linguistic decoding takes us part of the way to understanding an

utterance or text, but a crucial element of inference is involved at every stage: in deciding what the writer intended to say and imply, and on the writer's intended attitude to what was said or implied. The question remains, though, how should the inference process go?

7. Context

Most critics argue that context is the main factor at work as the reader performs the inferential tasks that I have described. This context is usually assumed to consist primarily (sometimes entirely) of the preceding text. In spoken communication, they argue that context is also supplied by the situation in which the utterance has taken place. In the case of a written text, like the literary work, they assume that the situation is described or supplied by the parts of the work that have gone before.

Relevance theory extends this notion of "context" to include all and only the assumptions that the reader uses to arrive at the intended interpretation. This clearly includes information drawn from the preceding text, and the situation in which an utterance is made (and by whom: narrator or character); but it also involves any other knowledge, beliefs or assumptions the reader uses in interpretation. These assumptions can be shared, or they can be completely personal, limited to the reader and unknown to anyone else. Most importantly, though, it is information that the reader can call to mind at the time he is reading the work. I will call this entire set of thoughts and ideas actually used in interpretation "contextual assumptions" or "context".[24]

Since context affects interpretation, in order to arrive at the intended interpretation, the audience must use the intended context. Clearly, once we know what contextual assumptions the writer intended the reader to use, then the intended statements, implications, and attitudes follow more or less automatically. We have seen in our discussion of (7), and of Housman's poem, that context plays a crucial role in determining what was said. In (8b), Dickens has provided a set of contextual assumptions that is intended to alter our first interpretation of Pecksniff's remark and to let us see that an entirely different implication may follow from his rather commonplace statement. Finally, the passage from *Huckleberry Finn* demonstrates that attitude, too, is crucially determined by context. The problem is that most

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[24] The notion of context is explored at greater length in Chapter 2.

of the time, writers do not explicitly supply context in, say, Dickens' helpful fashion; they are much more likely, like Twain, to leave the reader to work it out for himself. To the questions already raised - how the reader recognizes what is said or implied, or what the intended attitude is to what has been said or implied - we have to add another. How does the reader recognize the intended set of contextual assumptions, which he then uses in answering these questions?

We can see how important recognition of the intended set of contextual assumptions is if we look at a case where the reader fails to recognise it. In the Housman poem, we read that

(11) And silence sounds no worse than cheers
After earth has shut the ears.

One student wrote that this line meant that the athlete was hard of hearing because he didn't keep his ears clean. Most readers will reject this interpretation of the lines, because we assume that the rest of the poem suggests that Housman intends us to think about things connected with death and dying and not ideas connected with personal hygiene. We have been encouraged to think about funerals, flowers, and burials, and about all of these aspects of mourning.

Given this encouragement, we believe that Housman intends us to use the contextual assumptions that come readily to mind for someone who has been thinking along these lines. First of all, we recall in the culture we share with Housman, dead people are buried in the ground; we know that sound is muffled or "blocked" by the ground, or "earth"; and that dead people cannot hear anyway. Using all these contextual assumptions we conclude that since in fact no sound penetrates to the grave and since to be buried is to be incapable of hearing, then there are two excellent reasons why neither cheering nor silence will affect the dead athlete. We may go on to admire the way in which Housman has taken advantage of the chance connection between these two facts ("chance" because not all cultures bury their dead) to comment on the insensibility of the dead athlete to either praise or disinterest.

It is important to realize that although these assumptions do come readily to mind in the circumstances described, and do have an interesting effect, they are not the only assumptions connected with mourning that we could be thinking about. Not only can the dead athlete not hear, but he can't read either; so that those left behind would not bother sending a telegram. It, too, cannot penetrate to the coffin. There are other aspects we could

think about: funerals are expensive; Tibetans resort to "sky burials" because of their climate; widows wear black; lilies are often placed on caskets. What is interesting, and requires explanation, is not that we can think these thoughts, but that we do not readily call to mind *all* the things we know about funerals and dead athletes, and bring them to bear in interpreting this poem.

There is another consideration. In my student's error about why the athlete is unable to hear the cheers of victory, I have provided an example of an unacceptable interpretation. For most readers this will likely be the first time they have considered that particular reading of the poem. In fact, we do *not* compare all possible interpretations, using all possible contextual assumptions, before we decide which is the intended one. The act of understanding an utterance takes a very short time; even in poetry, unless the line is linguistically ambiguous, incomplete, or difficult, or unless the expression or thought is a very complex one, the reader reaches an understanding quickly. These facts suggest that readers have some way of recognizing the intended interpretation, without comparing all possible interpretations. The facts further suggest that readers do this by means of some criterion that permits them to accept or reject the interpretation that has "presented itself", and consider other interpretations only if this proves inadequate in some respect.

The intended interpretation, then, is the intended combination of explicit content, contextual assumptions and implications, and the writer's intended attitude to these. Clearly, we are looking at an inferential process rather than a decoding one. I would like to consider more closely the nature of the inference process involved.

Let's recall briefly how a code works. In coding, a message is matched or paired with a signal; when the signal is received, the rules of the code allow the receiver to retrieve the message by reversing the original encoding. The kind of communication I have been describing cannot be explained by coding, since there is no code-like way to "match up" meaning, context, implication and attitude as I have described them. No matter how subtle or complex the code, the reader is still always left with the problem of deciding which code or set of codes and sub-codes are to be applied in this particular case. Even if such codes existed, that is, the reader would still have to work out inferentially which codes, in which order and combination, the writer intended the reader to apply.

The fundamental problem is that on the code model of communication there is no way of accommodating the fact that choosing an appropriate set of contextual assumptions is part

of the interpretation process. Context cannot, by definition, be part of a "code". Attempts to formulate "contextual codes" have failed. Contextual assumptions are not decoded but inferred. They are supplied at a risk.

However, discounting the code model does not necessarily bring us any closer to a positive understanding of the interpretive process. Here the work of Paul Grice is of interest. In his *William James Lectures* (1967), Grice suggested that the intended interpretation is not decoded but inferred by a process of hypothesis formation and evaluation. On this approach, linguistic decoding and contextual assumptions determine the set of possible hypotheses; these are then evaluated in light of some general principle or principles of communication - the "standard" referred to above. Grice argued that writers are expected to obey a Co-operative Principle and maxims of truthfulness, informativeness, relevance and clarity. If a hypothesis fails to satisfy these expectations, it is automatically eliminated.

Relevance theory builds on the foundations laid by Grice, but goes beyond them. In particular, it is based on several assumptions about the way human beings think and communicate. These assumptions will bring me back to the central questions of this thesis, questions about the nature and process of literary interpretation, and in particular to those features of the literary interpretation which differentiate it from ordinary spontaneous interpretation.

8. Relevance theory: effect and effort

Four main assumptions underlie relevance theory.

(12) Every utterance has a variety of possible interpretations, compatible with the information which is encoded in the linguistic form of the utterance.

We have already examined this assumption from various angles in the discussion above. In the sections on the connection between evidence and interpretation, especially, I argued that there are several interpretations which a work (or part of the work) may support. Whether we look at interpretations that are entailed by the work or only those that are compatible with it - we see that there can be a large number of possible interpretations. In fact, what we are looking for is an interpretation that is *strongly supported* by the evidence of the text.

(13) Not all of these interpretations occur to the reader at the same time or with equal ease.

In (8a) and (8b), for instance, it takes some effort to come to an interpretation of Pecksniff's

remark other than the usual one. In fact, Dickens has not only to spell out the alternate interpretation, but the grounds on which it is based.[25] I am also safe in assuming that the student's unacceptable interpretations of *To An Athlete, Dying Young* that I have given, which are not incompatible with the linguistic information encoded in the Housman poem have not nevertheless occurred to the majority of my readers. The reality is that we need to work hard thinking up some of the possible interpretations of a work or utterance.

(14) The reader uses a single, very general criterion for evaluating interpretations as they occur to him.

An assumption along these lines was introduced explicitly with the Gricean account of interpretation, but is in fact used even by those critics who believe that readers use a decoding process to reach interpretations of a work. This suggests that they do not fully understand how the code model works. The idea of a criterion for evaluation *only* comes with an inferential account. When the code model proves unable to account for how interpretations are produced or evaluated, critics and theorists consistently turn to inference for a solution. They may embed hypothesis formation and confirmation in a larger, code model account of interpretation; or they may argue that the text is ambiguous (linguistically decodable in many different ways) and that the inferential criterion is needed simply for choosing between

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[25] Sometimes, of course, a writer will do precisely the opposite; under the guise of directing the reader to a particular interpretation, the writer will increase the ambiguity or vagueness of a passage. Melville's *The Confidence-Man* provides several instances of this ploy. One early passage, in a single complex sentence, makes it almost impossible for the reader to decide whether the gentleman with gold sleeve-buttons is angelic or demonic:

> "...nothing in his manner bespoke him righteous, but only good, and though to be good is much below being righteous, and though there is a difference between the two, yet not, it is to be hoped, so incompatible as that a righteous man can not be a good man; though, conversely, in the pulpit it has been with much cogency urged, that a merely good man, that is, one good merely by his nature, is so far from thereby being righteous, that nothing short of a total change and conversion can make him so; which is something which no honest mind, well read in the history of righteousness, will care to deny; nevertheless, since St Paul himself, agreeing in a sense with the pulpit distinction, though not altogether in the pulpit deduction, and also pretty plainly intimating which of the two qualities in question enjoys his preference; I say, since St Paul has so meaningly said, that `scarcely for a righteous man will one die, yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die'; therefore, when we repeat of this gentleman, that he was only a good man, whatever else by severe censors may be objected to him, it is still to be hoped that his goodness will not at least be considered criminal in him." (Melville 1857, 1971: 37-38)

As Twain said in another context, "It takes the chromo".

decoded interpretations.[26] Although critics propose communication models of varying degrees of complexity, all accounts have in common the assumption that the process is driven by an evaluation mechanism or method. I discuss these models in slightly more detail in the review of literature and in Chapter 3. What distinguishes the relevance-theoretic account is its attempt to justify the criterion by appeal to broader cognitive factors.

(15) Finally, relevance theory assumes that this criterion is powerful enough to exclude all but *at most* a single interpretation of the work. Having found an interpretation that satisfies this criterion, the reader need look no farther: there will never be more than one.

I should point out that this does not mean that the interpretation the reader arrives at is not subject to revision or correction. As I said at the outset, such revision is at the heart of the literary interpretive process. The fact is that most literary interpretations fall short of being *fully* acceptable, because they rarely make sense of *all* the evidence; revisions merely move in the direction of increased acceptability.

As I will show in the next chapter, the criterion is also meant to allow for the fact that literary interpretations are often vague, and that different readers come up with marginally or substantially different interpretations which are nonetheless compatible with each other. The notion of "interpretation" used in relevance theory allows for such complexity, and for the fact that different readers will notice different aspects of a given "interpretation". All this will be discussed below.

According to relevance theory, the criterion mentioned in (14) rests on an assumption about the way that human beings think:

(16) Human cognition is relevance-oriented. That is, we pay attention to information that seems relevant to us.

Since every utterance, every work is a bid for the audience's attention, it automatically raises an expectation of relevance. It is around this expectation that the criterion is built. Recall that any utterance or work can give rise to a variety of interpretations. These will be relevant in different ways. Some interpretations will be very relevant, some fairly relevant, and some not relevant at all. It seems obvious that the reader should choose the interpretation that best

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[26] Yet the code model of communication cannot account for the production of these interpretations in the first place. As I argue throughout this thesis, the code model of communication cannot adequately account for the range of interpretations which an inferential criterion is supposed to evaluate and select from.

satisfies his expectation of relevance. We now need to say more precisely what this expectation of relevance is.

Sperber and Wilson (1986a) define relevance in terms of contextual effect and processing effort. In this view, as noted briefly above, new information provided by the work achieves contextual effects and is relevant when it interacts with the individual's contextual assumptions in one of three ways. In the individual's set of existing assumptions, assumptions may be strengthened; or they may be contradicted and eliminated. In other words, new information is relevant when it provides evidence for or against existing beliefs.

The third way in which new information can affect the individual is by combining with his existing assumptions to yield contextual implications. A contextual implication is a logical implication derived neither from the existing context alone, nor from the new information alone. Instead, the contextual implication is derived by a process of inference from the new information in combination with the existing contextual assumptions. This will be easier to think about if we use an example.

Let us imagine that, in the first week of lectures, I am addressing my students, and giving details of my marking procedures. At one point, I say

(17) "For every word misspelled, I will deduct one percent."

Now if a student already suspected from my classroom remarks that I would penalize bad spelling, then that assumption has been confirmed, or strengthened. If another student had hoped that I would not deduct marks for bad spelling, then his assumption has been contradicted and eliminated. If a third student thought that if poor spelling led to grade deductions then he was in trouble, then he can derive a contextual implication: he is in trouble.

This is a very simple example, but it illustrates the basic notion of relevance clearly enough. We know that in reality, utterances are usually intended to have more than one effect. Other things being equal, the more contextual effects an utterance achieves, the more relevant it will be. Hence, relevance is a matter of degree and we need to decide how much relevance the audience of an utterance or text is entitled to expect.

Sperber and Wilson argue that there is a second factor affecting degrees of relevance. Achieving contextual effects costs mental effort. The greater the effort required to achieve the effects, the lower the relevance will be.

When we consider this second effort factor in the definition of relevance, we see that

there are two main mechanisms at work. First, we make a cognitive effort when we go to our memory or imagination for the assumptions we use in constructing a context - and the greater the effort, the lower the relevance of the result. Second, some effort is needed to extract information from the utterance itself. When an utterance is long, or contains information that makes no contribution to contextual effects, we will have to make more of an effort to process it. If it uses unusual or obscure words, or depends on difficult logic, we will have to work harder to understand it. In any of these cases, the extra effort means that the overall relevance is lessened.

In the event that I said (17) in a course in which spelling is not a significant factor - for example, one involving multiple-choice quizzes - then the effort the students will have to make to reach a relevant interpretation will be on the side of creating a suitable context, in which an adequate range of contextual effects can be obtained. They will have to use their imaginations to find a way in which my statement might have been intended to have some effect for them. To a certain extent, this same effort is called for in (8b), even though Dickens supplies the most important of the new contextual assumptions.

In *The Confidence-Man*, Melville demands that his readers expend considerable effort in processing many of the sentences of the novel. The first chapter contains at least one paragraph made up of a single giant sentence; the writer alludes to obscure persons and events, and uses very rare word choices throughout the novel. In addition, there are several points at which he deliberately introduces difficult logical arguments. The most famous, perhaps, are his descriptions of the man with gold sleeve buttons and the wife ("Goneril") of the man with the weed. Both descriptions are extremely dense and difficult to read.[27] The outcome has been that while some critics have asserted that the first passage is intended to describe a man of perfect goodness, and the second a woman of perfect beauty, others have

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[27] We have already seen an excerpt of his manner of describing the man with gold sleeve-buttons. His treatment of Goneril is of the same type:

> "Goneril was young, in person lithe and straight, too straight, indeed, for a woman, a complexion naturally rosy, and which would have been charmingly so, but for a certain hardness and bakedness, like that of the glazed colours on stone-ware. Her hair was of a deep, rich, chestnut, but worn in close, short curls all round her head. Her Indian figure was not without its impairing effect on her bust, while her mouth would have been pretty but for a trace of a moustache. Upon the whole, aided by the resources of her toilet, her appearance at distance was such, that some might have thought her, if anything, rather beautiful, though of a style of beauty rather peculiar and cactus-like." (Melville 1857, 1971: 62)

It is a tribute to the success of Melville's sleight-of-hand writing style that some critics have claimed that Goneril is, without reservation, a beautiful young woman.

as vigorously claimed that the same passages describe the precise opposite: an apparently good man who does evil by proxy, and a woman of surpassing hideousness. Not surprisingly, many readers find that the effort is not worth the effects they gain by reading the novel.

The interpretation of a novel or other work can be described in this framework as involving a search for its intended relevance. In order to see the intended relevance, the reader must decode the linguistic meaning of each sentence, identify the intended set of contextual assumptions, and use these to identify the statement the reader intended to make, the attitude she intended to express, and the intended set of contextual effects, or *implicatures*. This, according to relevance theory, describes in general terms the process that occurs when a reader interprets a literary work, or a listener understands an utterance. The question then becomes, how is this intended interpretation identified?

9. The criterion in interpretation

Earlier, I argued that we need some general standard for evaluating interpretations. This standard, I argued, applies to both literary and spontaneous interpretation. I also argued that it is not separate from the process by which interpretations are reached: that in fact, interpretation is made up of two aspects - hypothesis formation and evaluation. Earlier, I laid out some reasons for this position. I would now like to outline the criterion proposed by relevance theory, and show how it applies to the construction and evaluation of interpretations. The criterion proposed by Sperber and Wilson (1986a) is one of *consistency with the principle of relevance.*

The principle of relevance is the principle that every utterance or other act of communication creates an expectation of its own optimal relevance. In "Relevance and understanding" (1994), Deirdre Wilson defines optimal relevance in this way:

(18) Optimal relevance

An utterance, on a given interpretation, is optimally relevant if and only if:

(a) it achieves enough contextual effects to be worth the hearer's attention;

(b) it puts the hearer to no gratuitous processing effort in achieving those effects.

We can see at once why certain literary works have relatively small numbers of readers. The effort required to untangle a Henry James sentence, or to process Melville's lexical choices, or to follow Joyce's tortuous stream-of-consciousness, or to imagine Mervyn Peake's worlds,

may be too great and the contextual effects too small to justify their attention; and consequently they do not read these books.

As noted above, to see the intended relevance of an utterance amounts to recovering the intended combination of explicit content, context, attitude and implications. For the resulting interpretation to be acceptable, we must be able to see how the writer could reasonably have expected the work to be optimally relevant to us on that interpretation. Let us examine a few examples to see how this criterion can explain why some interpretations are unacceptable.

I have mentioned four interpretations which most readers will find unacceptable. One student's interpretation of the Housman poem included the assertion that the athlete was still alive. This interpretation is excluded by evidence explicitly provided in the text, which directly contradicts it. According to relevance theory, when two contradictory assumptions are discovered, the weaker of the two must be rejected. In this case, the assumption that the athlete is alive is the weaker of the two, and must itself be rejected. In this way, relevance theory incorporates the connection between evidence and interpretation proposed earlier.

Another interpretation of the same poem claimed that Housman intended to comment on the senseless loss of young men's lives in war. This interpretation hinged on the single item "fields where glory does not stay". The rest of the text provides no supporting evidence - indeed it provides good evidence for another, incompatible interpretation. In the terms of relevance theory, this other interpretation should be easier to construct, and once constructed, would be fully acceptable. The "battlefield" interpretation is thus ruled out by clause (b) of the definition of optimal relevance as demanding gratuitous effort. A writer aiming at optimal relevance, who really intended the "battlefield" interpretation, should have made it more accessible, that is, provided more clues to it in the text.

The reading of the Mother Goose rhyme can be dismissed along the same lines. Readers would need to construct an enormous context, containing assumptions that would be both hard to call up out of memory and difficult to imagine, in order to reach this interpretation of the nursery rhyme. Other, fully acceptable interpretations can be much more easily accessed. According to relevance, the first fully acceptably interpretation that the writer could have intended is the *only* fully acceptable interpretation. Other, less accessible interpretations might yield adequate effects, and thus satisfy clause (a) of the definition of optimal relevance; however, they would fail to satisfy clause (b) precisely because a writer

who intended them should have spared her reader the unnecessary effort of constructing, considering, and having no way of eliminating another, unintended interpretation first. Hence, the first acceptable interpretation is the only interpretation, and is the only one the reader is justified in choosing.

There is another kind of interpretation that I have not yet mentioned, but which is quite common among student responses to poetry. This is what instructors often call an "empty" interpretation. An interpretation of the poem along these lines would typically run something like this: The poet tells us that an athlete has died young and has gone to the land of the dead with his garland of victory. This interpretation is not false; it is not incompatible with the evidence in the poem; it is not difficult to reach. The problem is that it mentions no contextual effects: no interaction with existing contextual assumptions has taken place, and hence no relevance is achieved. Although the effort used is very small, the fact that *no* effects have been achieved means that the interpretation as it stands is not consistent with the principle of relevance.

Let us now move on to harder cases, of interpretations which are not immediately ruled out as incompatible with strongly evidenced assumptions, or entirely lacking in contextual effects. We need to look at cases where there are several competing interpretations, and where critics standardly appeal to notions such as "coherence", or seek to fit an interpretation into a wider body of cultural or textual assumptions, or choose one interpretation on the basis of its accommodation of all the elements of the texts, and so on. We need to look, in other words, at how the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance sheds light on what makes one particular interpretation the *best.* Notice that here we are dealing with issues that do not normally arise in spontaneous interpretation, but only with literary (or at least lengthy, planned) texts.

I have argued that in ostensive communication the writer has a set of intentions that she wants to communicate, and is actively helping the reader to recognise them. As a result, she provides what she believes the reader needs to reach the intended interpretation. As noted above, she should therefore do her best to make sure that the intended interpretation is as easy as possible for the reader to construct. This follows from clause (b) of the definition of optimal relevance. Clause (b) states that the writer should avoid causing the reader gratuitous processing effort. From this it also follows that *all* the elements of the text must make some contribution to overall relevance. Consequently, any element that can't be

accommodated in this way will result in stylistic infelicity, or provide evidence that the intended interpretation has not yet been arrived at.

There are two ways, then, in which unaccommodated elements of the text can be treated. They may be evidence of stylistic failure on the writer's part; or they may be evidence that the optimally relevant intended interpretation has not yet been found. Most readers of works actually treat such evidence in these ways.

Consider the case of a student struggling to get through Gray's *Elegy*. For the student still learning to read complex works, the poem presents a great many elements which he will not be able to accommodate immediately. The student who is defeated by the problem will probably sum up his reactions by dismissing the poem as "boring" - surely the strongest statement of stylistic failure a reader can make. What "boring" means here is precisely that gratuitous processing effort is being expended, and too few effects achieved. On the other hand, a student who assumes that these elements were intended by the writer to have been accommodated is likely to assume also that his own interpretive skills are lacking. For him, these troublesome elements are evidence that he has to continue working on the poem; that is, to continue expending effort until he has recognised the optimally relevant intended interpretation.

Under the definition of optimal relevance, the writer ought not to make gratuitous demands on the reader's processing effort. We assume then that the reader is not supposed to recover and accept an interpretation only to reject or revise it immediately afterward. It would seem, though, that examples (7) and (8-8a) are exactly cases where this process occurs. After all, in (7), the reader reaches one interpretation of the sentence (either an expression of relief, or one of pride) and then goes on almost immediately to construct the other interpretation. Again, in (8-8a), the first interpretation of the sentence is followed by a direction from the narrator to revise that interpretation. How are we to understand these cases in the light of relevance theory?

In (7), the pun gives access to two different interpretations. Neither interpretation on its own yields enough effects to offset the fact that both interpretations have been intentionally brought to mind, and neither can be rejected out of hand as something the

advertiser could not reasonably have wanted to communicate.[28] As he looks at the ad for more evidence of the writer's intentions, the reader will no doubt notice that it has been placed by the Trans-Manche Link. With this extra information in the context, he can easily explain the intentional ambiguity. The double effect - relief and pride - is precisely what the writer intended. No other interpretation justifies the deliberate formulation of the advertisement to bring both interpretations to mind.

In (8-8a), the new interpretation includes the new assumption (encouraged by the narrator) that what is seen as natural may be evil rather than morally neutral or even good. This new assumption has several interesting effects. To begin with, the new interpretation adds to the reader's knowledge of Pecksniff's character. He may conclude, as the narrator strongly suggests, that Pecksniff is naturally bad. It also adds to, or confirms, our knowledge of the narrator's attitude toward Pecksniff. Since the narrator is our primary source of information about intended attitudes, this effect is not trivial. Finally, we notice that an assumption that it is likely the reader held earlier - that what is natural is good, or at least morally neutral - is contradicted and eliminated by the new interpretation. This third effect may become quite important as we continue to read and interpret the novel. The reader may see this assumption as expressing one of Dickens' major themes: that the evil aspects of human nature, no less than the good, are due at least as much to nature as to upbringing. One possible effect of this new assumption is that we can never take the "natural" as being identical with the "good'. As much of the novel centres on tracing the effects of families and family characters on human beings, this is a relevant assumption.

From the reader's point of view, clause (b) of the definition of optimal relevance means that once he has found or constructed an interpretation that satisfies his expectation of relevance, in a way that the writer might reasonably have foreseen, he need look no further. The *first* interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is the *only* interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, and is the one the reader should choose. The interpretation intended by the writer may have to fit with other evidence available to the reader, from the writer's other works, from biographical material about the writer, and so on. We should notice that this extension of context is again something special to non-spontaneous interpretation. What we are trying to find out in this way - and this is true even

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[28] For an extended treatment of puns in a relevance-theoretic framework, see Tanaka (1992).

when we use evidence not found in the text - is the intended set of contextual assumptions, that is, the ones the writer thought would be most accessible to us.

At this point, it may be worth going through the steps involved in the process of interpretation. I am assuming that interpretation happens more or less along these lines:

(19a) The reader is going to interpret an utterance.

(19b) He begins with a small context; perhaps consisting of the interpretation of the immediately preceding utterance.

(19c) He works out the effects of the utterance in that initial context.

(19d) If these effects are not enough to justify his attention, then he expands the context.

(19e) He then repeats steps (19b-d) until he has got enough return on his efforts to make the utterance optimally relevant in a way that the writer could reasonably have foreseen.

When the reader reaches (19e), he has an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, and should stop.

We can look at two examples of how this process might work in interpreting two poems, or parts of poems. The first is relatively simple, and the second more difficult. We will look first at the opening two stanzas of the Housman poem, and then at a more general interpretation of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*.

If we go back to the Housman poem, we may notice something odd about the first two stanzas. Both stanzas describe the athlete ("you") being "brought home" "shoulder-high", and set down at the threshold of his "home", or at the centre of his home town ("the market-place"). Both make reference to the town's reception of him ("cheering" and "stiller"), and both refer to his having run a race of some kind ("the race"; "the road all runners come"). When we look for an interpretation of these two stanzas, we see that the first straightforwardly describes a victory parade. The second, though, despite its references to runners, races and to the athlete being borne "shoulder-high", would not produce any effects if it were merely restating the information given in the first stanza. We therefore have to expand our context to include the information provided by the title - that the poem is about an athlete "dying young".

Now we expand our context a little further to include assumptions about funerals. We know that in Housman's culture caskets are borne on the shoulders of pall-bearers; we therefore conclude that the athlete's being carried shoulder-high alludes to his being carried in a coffin, rather than being "chaired" about the town in victory. This conclusion receives

added support from the conclusion we draw from the reference to the "road" all "runners" must tread. From this we may conclude that this is the road to death; if our context contains a readily available assumption about St Paul's comments about runners and victory, then our conclusion is strengthened and we receive more effects from this contextualisation.

We can go still further, and notice the way that Housman uses similar descriptions of very dissimilar events: a victory parade (in the first stanza) and a funeral procession (in the second). This similarity can very easily prompt us to make a further comparison between the two situations of the young athlete. The first stanza, we notice, alludes to him at the height of his local fame; the second at the moment before his townsmen relinquish him to that "stiller town", which we may interpret as the graveyard. In fact, this comparison, which has a great many effects, seems to be exactly Housman's intention, since it involves an idea - some connection between fame and death - which is repeated throughout the rest of the poem. As well, Housman's device of using similar physical descriptions to suggest very different situations will turn up again, as already noted in my discussion of the fourth stanza.

So the process given above not only describes the way the reader reaches his conclusion, it accounts for the reader's intuition that one set of conclusions leads him to expand his context and derive even more effects from the lines. We realize that although the actual expansion and interpretation are taken on by the reader, the writer has provided a strong "push" not only in the linguistically-encoded information of the poem, but in the *way* in which he made this information available. This is the point at which we start to discuss matters of style, of form as well as content. We can see this operating even more strongly in the second poem.

Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73* is not really difficult until we come to the final couplet. The first twelve lines, divided into three quatrains, are highly metaphorical but relatively clear allusions to three separate subjects: autumn, twilight, a fire dying to embers. The final two lines, though, are linguistically and logically complex:

(20) This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

In order to interpret this sentence, we must know what "This" and "that" refer to, and why the fact that the person referred to by "thou" perceives "this" strengthens the love the addressee has for the speaker. The couplet follows twelve lines of poetry that make use of metaphor, personification, and repetition. We assume that the writer believes that there is some

connection between all the evidence he has provided in those preceding lines, and the difficult sentence he ends the poem with. Our sense of coherence, as this intuition is often called, is really our sense that the writer does not waste effort. Everything that is drawn to our attention by the writer, we presume, has to have some effect: and the most economical interpretation is the one that integrates all the evidence into a single whole, drawing on assumptions and strategies that are reused throughout the work.

Now, I have already done a large amount of the interpretation of the poem when I claim that the first three quatrains are metaphorical allusions to autumn, twilight and a dying fire. I assume that most readers of the poem will reach the same conclusion about these lines. We can also grant that the speaker is inviting a comparison between these states and his own condition. On this assumption, we conclude that all three conditions share the fact that they are at the end of a life-cycle or natural process; all three are close to some sort of death or ending. The fire is "dying"; the day is nearing its "close"; and although autumn eventually gives ground to spring, the writer compares the trees' limbs with the withered arms of old men, and calls the branches "bare" and "ruined". Furthermore, he has explicitly, and three times, said that these states are to be witnessed in him. Bearing all this in mind, we come to the odd references in the final lines. The "This" which "thou perceiv'st" is, on this reading, most likely to refer to the condition that the speaker shares with autumn, twilight, and a dying fire. The specific aspects we can conclude the speaker shares with these conditions is the shortness of the time remaining to him, and his enfeebled physical condition. The fact that the word "love" is mentioned twice in the couplet encourages us to conclude that the poem's subject includes a love relationship; and the fact that the poem is addressed to "thou" - whose properties include its use in intimate relationships - strengthens this assumption.

We may, using this greatly expanded context, now conclude that "this" (his condition) is not of the kind normally to inspire love or intimacy. After all, our knowledge not just of love poetry but of the experience of love in general suggests that lovers usually look forward to the enjoyment of many years together and take pleasure in one another. The speaker of the poem has suggested that he has very little time left to him, and that in addition he is hardly in the condition to give or receive pleasure, being (we suspect) enfeebled and unattractive. Now the efforts we put into constructing this context begin to produce quite considerable effects. We conclude that the speaker is communicating a great deal in the final lines, some things quite determinate, others vague and primarily emotional.

The speaker tells his lover that her decision to remain with him, though she perceives his enfeebled condition, and realizes the short time they have to look forward to, reveals the strength of her love for him. We conclude that a lover who perseveres in a relationship which will inevitably bring loss and heartbreak (not by design, but by nature), a lover who is not frightened by the prospect of pain, is very likely to have a deep affection for the beloved. It is this depth which the speaker celebrates, and which he says is testified to by the conditions imposed on the relationship by his enfeebled state. Now from this point the reader can go on to other conclusions, less determinate perhaps but not the less intended for that. The reader may admire the lover; may wish to experience something similar; may experience poignant emotions; and so on. We do not need to follow the reader down any of these lines of interpretation.

Notice how closely this interpretation process follows what relevance theory predicts. The reader begins by looking for effects from the context he has been encouraged to construct by the evidence provided by the writer in the work. As these initial effects prove too little for the effort expended, the reader expands the context. This process continues until the reader has reached an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Relevance theory thus clarifies, integrates, and explains the intuitions that many critics have had about what makes an interpretation acceptable - and shows how they follow from the principles governing spontaneous comprehension.

10. Cautions

Communication creates a presumption of optimal relevance. However, on the account I am proposing, there is no guarantee that an interpretation that satisfies the reader's expectation of relevance is in fact the intended interpretation. We have only to recall the several examples I have been using of unacceptable interpretations to see that this is so. There are several ways in which these unacceptable, unintended interpretations may be produced.

The reader may overlook an interpretation or assumption the writer thought would be obvious. In the most evidently erroneous interpretation of the Housman poem, the student claimed that the athlete was alive, if unhappy. We may assume that Housman believed that the inference that the athlete is dead would be obvious to his readers. Clearly, he felt it

obvious enough not to mention explicitly in the body of the poem that the person being addressed is dead.

On the other hand, the reader may notice an interpretation the writer had not thought of. In this case, the writer may not have realized that the evidence of the work would lead the reader more quickly to an interpretation she did not intend. In the Housman poem, again, we can see that for some readers the "fields" in the clause "fields where glory does not stay" could more easily be taken to mean "battlefields" than "playing fields". Indeed, for a North American reader, who uses the term "track" for the site of a race, the first assumption would be that battlefields are intended. It is only when the evidence of the whole poem is considered that this initial reading, which Housman may not have foreseen and which he probably did not intend, becomes unacceptable in ways I have already mentioned.

Misinterpretations occur. An inferential theory of communication does not guarantee that the correct interpretation will invariably be recovered; instead it identifies the principles which the reader uses to arrive at his interpretation. These interpretations, as any teacher of literature can testify, can be wrong; that is, readers can formulate interpretations that are unintended by the writer, or at odds with the intended interpretation. In fact, a theory of communication should explain why such misinterpretations occur.

When we look at unintended interpretations, we must remember that some misinterpretations are rationally justified. This is not the same thing as claiming that they are correct in the sense that they are the ones the writer intended. The example I have just mentioned, of the misinterpretation of the line about playing fields, illustrates just this sort of case. A reader who is not accustomed to using the term "playing fields" is rationally justified in coming up with the hypothesis that the fields are "battle fields", if that is the term more usual (and therefore more readily accessible) in his dialect. The evidence of the line alone supports either reading. It is a commonplace poetic thought that the glory of battle or of war is also fleeting. The process of deciding is relevance-oriented; the resulting interpretation of the line is rational. The problem is that the interpretation is not the one Housman could reasonably have intended, given the rest of the evidence he has provided.

One can indeed imagine a case where the whole interpretation of a poem that a later generation chooses is rationally justified given the evidence available to them, but nonetheless wrong. Word meanings change, contextual assumptions change, the organisation of memory changes. A large part of academic literary interpretation precisely involves

reconstructing conditions for interpretation that the writer would have taken for granted at the time.

The second cautionary note concerns optimal relevance. An utterance does not actually have to be optimally relevant in order to be acceptable and comprehensible. If we consider the case of Isaac Watts' poems, which are now generally out of favour, we see that the reader who does not share Watts' view of the world will not find his classic poems *"How doth the busy little bee"* and *"'Tis the voice of the sluggard"* particularly relevant. However, a reader who does not share Watts' assumptions can still see how Watts *could* have intended the poems to be relevant; the fact that they have no relevance for him is beside the point. It does not affect the reader's judgment that the poems are both acceptable and comprehensible as communication, if not as poetry. The same point, of course, applies to ordinary comprehension: we do not have to believe an utterance in order to understand it: we merely have to see what we were *intended* to believe.

At this point we have a context for the claim I have made about the writer's intentions and standards of acceptability. It is as part of the process of interpretation, as I have described and argued for it here, that interpretations (or hypotheses) are evaluated, that a standard is applied. This standard operates in creating the interpretation, clearly enough. And in common interpretation, it operates as the standard by which the reader judges his own interpretations, determining the point at which he has understood. But I want to add that crucially, in literary interpretation, this standard operates when a reader judges the interpretation of another reader. This is the point at which relevance theory may be applied specifically to literary interpretation.

We may now see why the criterion has been expressed so that there is a burden of responsibility on the writer's side. I have claimed that what permits the reader to form and evaluate interpretations is precisely the reader's presumption of some degree of responsibility on the writer's part. But raising the question of responsibility implies other questions. We now have to wonder about the kind and degree of the reader's responsibility. This will involve thinking about the relationship among four related but distinct aspects of this process: the writer's intentions; the writer's responsibility; the reader's responsibility; and the reader's assumptions. We have to decide at what point a reader can be said to be drawing conclusions on his own responsibility; and when the writer's intentions will have been exhausted. The question of responsibility in interpretation is taken up in Chapter 2 in the discussion of

indeterminacy and vagueness in communication.

It turns out that the writer's intentions may be central after all to our understanding of literary interpretation, and in particular to discussions of standards of acceptability. We see besides that all three elements - the writer, the reader, and the text - are vital to an understanding of the interpretive process. The text provides the evidence for the writer's intentions, while the reader has the responsibility for recovering these intentions. The reader can only do this on the presumption that the work provides evidence which is intended to assist him in recognizing those intentions.

So far, we have looked at some of the basic assumptions of relevance theory; and I have argued for them on the basis of examples drawn primarily from literary texts. But there are other questions which have been raised by my arguments. We need to look more closely at the claim that the *first* acceptable interpretation is the *only* acceptable interpretation - a claim that will seem counter-intuitive to many literary critics. A crucial point to be borne in mind is that in literature, most interpretations are *not* fully acceptable. That is, they are only partial, and so the search for *the* fully acceptable interpretation goes on.

We need also to draw out the implications of the claim that extra effort implies extra effects, which issue I also address in Chapter 3. We have to examine the question of degrees of responsibility, and how this may apply in cases where there are very elaborate interpretations of long, complex works. As I have suggested above, the line we draw between implications and assumptions the writer intended us to recover, and those the reader forms on his own responsibility, may be very fuzzy. Finally, I have not yet looked at the question of determinacy; this too needs exploration. These issues provide the basis for the next chapter.

Before going on to this discussion, though, we need to consider what the approach I am taking implies about the way we look at the literary interpretive process. We have been used to critical approaches that evaluate the interpretations of the works; or which evaluate the works on the basis of the reader's interpretation (or understanding) of them. So most critical theories have concentrated on the relation between reader, writer, and work, but with a particular focus. Let me explain.

We generally assume that to say that a reader "interprets" a literary work is another way of saying that he has responded to that work in a particular way, producing a specific kind of result. Most critics put this response at the centre of their discussion: they examine

its accuracy, truth, falsity or plausibility; they look at how the interpretation represents the text; they propose standards of acceptability and strategies of interpretation; and they are concerned with theories about the nature and process of interpretation, literature, reading and evaluation. All these kinds of discussion have in common that they begin with the relevance *of the interpretation.*

Relevance theory, however, is built around the relevance not of the interpretation but of the work itself. This will seem odd to some critics, who assume that the relevance of the work is shown by the response of the readers, that it is a quality which must be demonstrated rather than assumed. To begin with assuming that the work is relevant, some will protest, is to begin at the wrong end of the process; such an approach is bound to lead to circular reasoning. In reality, it is the only way to avoid a dead-end in constructing a theory.

The interpretation comes after the work; it is a response to the work. People read a work because they assume it has some relevance to them; that is, they believe that it will have some effect on them by making sense to them, in very specific ways. We begin with the reader's expectation that the writer has provided evidence, through the work, of thoughts which she believes will be relevant to the reader. If we begin from this assumption, then we can see that a reader's interpretation, far from being the justification or description of the work that many critics assume, is actually an attempt to discover that relevance and recover those effects. It is *because* readers assume that the work is relevant that they try to recognize the writer's intentions and to reach the interpretation which the writer intended and which will, they assume, produce the effects that will make the effort of interpretation worthwhile.

I will take up the implications of this presumption in the next chapter in my discussion of vagueness, indeterminacy and poetic effects.

Chapter Two:
Indeterminacy, vagueness and poetic effects

> "It is not enough that there be a meaning which may be hammered out of the sentence, but that the language should be so pellucid that the meaning should be rendered without an effort to the reader;- and not some proportion of meaning, but the very sense, no more and no less, which the writer intended to put in his work." (Trollope, *Autobiography* 234-35)

> Gaddis: ...it was my hope - for many readers it worked, for others it did not - that having made some effort they would not read too agonizedly slowly and carefully, trying to figure out who is talking and so forth. It was the *flow* that I wanted, for the readers to read and be swept along, to participate. And enjoy it. And occasionally chuckle, laugh along the way.
> Interviewer: But if they read along like that, they may miss a lot.
> Gaddis: This is a risk I take, but isn't that what life is, after all? Missing something that's right there before you? (Abádi-Nagy 1987: 80)

1. The problem of vague communication

One of the fundamental questions which any theory of communication must answer is *what counts as communication*. We must be clear about what the theory is attempting to explain. To do this, we need to decide what sorts of things *can* be communicated, and this brings us to the problem of vague communication. Most theories of communication have assumed that what is communicated can be limited to determinate sets of clear, unambiguous propositions. On the other hand, we talk informally about the communication of emotions, impressions, attitudes, and vague ideas. As we investigate the question of what is communicated, considerations of vagueness and indeterminacy become of great importance.

If such considerations are important for a theory of ordinary, everyday communication, then in a theory of the interpretation of literature they become crucial. Literature, indeed, seems intended to communicate precisely those things which present the greatest challenge to most theories of communication. In theories of spontaneous verbal comprehension, it is possible to "idealize away" from some problems by claiming that non-verbal communication (including, for example sighs, groans, shrugs), by definition falls outside of

the proper domain of things to be explained[29]. But attempting to account for literary works raises in acute form the question of whether our theories of communication can deal with the communication of impressions, emotions, attitudes, vague ideas and so forth.

Most literary works are of course entirely verbal; there are special cases of image poems (Herbert's *Easter Wings*) and visual puns (Enright's *The Typewriter Revolution*), but these do not affect the fact that literature is essentially verbal communication. A theory of verbal communication must therefore have some way of accounting for the full range of what can be communicated by literature. Literary interpretation is, in a sense, a test case for theories of verbal communication, for the techniques and effects of literary texts are present in some degree in most communication.[30] A theory that cannot account for them is impoverished; and one that excludes them is too narrow. In this chapter, I will examine some of the problems that vague communication presents for pragmatic theory and sketch the solutions offered by relevance theory. I will thus be extending the brief discussion of relevance theory made in the previous chapter, and working through its implications for vagueness and indeterminacy in communication.

We know that the same literary work, in the hands of different readers, can yield significantly different literary interpretations. Also, as Fish observes, the same reader can produce different interpretations of the same work at different times, while a range of readers may produce interpretations that are largely similar to one another. In Pettersson (1988), we find that four critics produced significantly different interpretations of Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* within five years of one another.[31] There is no reason to assume, as indeed few critics would, that such variations result from misinterpretation. A theory of communication should not only allow for them: it should *account* for them.

To this objective evidence of the interpretive indeterminacy of literary works we can add subjective evidence based on our own experience. When reading a good poem or successful work of fiction, most readers have the intuition that it is hard to pin down exactly

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[29] Most textbooks on pragmatics (eg Levinson 1983, Leech 1983) give little or no attention to non-verbal communication.

[30] For arguments that there is no clear dividing line between literary and non-literary works, see Culler (1984), Altieri (1978), Crosman (1984), Eagleton (1983), and Fish (1980, 1994).

[31] I noted this work in the previous chapter, and suggested at that time that the reader of this chapter who checked the excerpted passages in Appendix B could see how widely these interpretations vary.

what the writer is trying to convey. What is more, readers have this conviction in spite of the fact that they feel that nonetheless, a great deal is being "gotten across" somehow.

We see this intuition most clearly with students who are just beginning to learn to read literary works for the purpose of analyzing them and articulating their interpretations and impressions. When asked what, say, *We'll Go No More A-Roving* is "about", such students typically come up with one of two responses. In the more usual case, they reply with a gross over-generalisation, claiming that the poem is "about" death, or love, or old age, or decline, or falling out of love, or divorce, and so on. Other students, the minority, will concoct a complete narrative about the poem, taking the "characters" from the moment of their first meeting through the ups and downs of their relationship to the inevitable and tragic conclusion (death, falling out of love, old age, illness, divorce). We could characterise the first response as a summary description of the topic or situation of the poem. The second type of response is really little more than a narrative that develops this topic by situating it in a stereotypical or familiar pattern. That these patterns are drawn from other texts around them (television or movie plots, gossip, and contemporary folklore), while it has encouraged some critics to erase the distinction between literary and non-literary texts, adds weight to the claim that literary works form a sub-type of everyday communication, the kind a theory must account for.

In either case, the students' responses show that their first intuition about the poem is that something important and rather complex is being conveyed. When they "reduce" the poem to its topic, they invariably choose one (like death, love, or old age) that picks out a very large, vague set of ideas or assumptions that can be developed or specified in virtually unlimited directions. And although any one narrative derived from this topic may be quite specific, there is frequently little or no similarity among a set of such interpretations, each student demonstrating the indeterminacy of the original topic by producing a story that is nearly unique in its specifications (however much it may adhere to social norms or stereotypical patterns of behaviour). The problem with these types of unsuccessful interpretations lies not in the students' understanding of the poem (or at least, not primarily), but in their ability to deal with indeterminacy and vagueness in literary works. The very richness of the impressions they receive is the source of the confusion: there is too much for them to express simply or coherently, and so they turn either to very indeterminate generalities, or to very determinate stereotypical narrative patterns to help them express their

impressions.

Many students also suspect that if they do manage to "narrow down" the interpretations, and express these impressions in a series of determinate paraphrases, they will destroy the effect of the poem. Most teachers see the evidence of this belief in their students' reluctance to analyze or "tear apart" a literary work. Students can become positively mulish when the work is one which has been significant to them. They typically complain that analysis destroys the "magic" of the work: that by reducing the impressions of, for example, *The Road Not Taken* to a determinate set of propositions they will lose whatever it is made the poem important to them in the first place. One of the challenges in teaching the analysis and interpretation of literature is to show students how to "take apart" a poem (or other work) while both preserving and *increasing* the effects they can gain from it.

These two responses - interpretation through gross overgeneralisation (or stereotyping), or the refusal to engage the poem intellectually for fear of destroying its effects - present a challenge for all theories of communication. The first demonstrates how students deal with vagueness and indeterminacy in literary works; the second strongly suggests that such vagueness cannot be reduced to a set of determinate propositions without diminishing the work's effectiveness. Most theorists, however, simply avoid the issue in one of two ways. In the first case, they define "communication" in such a way that the vaguer aspects of communication are excluded; this is the route typically taken by Gricean pragmatics and speech-act theory. In the second case, they talk in vague terms of such properties as "connotations", but these properties are left unanalysed by the theory; this is the route typically taken by semioticians. The challenge for a theory of communication is to deal with the vague aspects of communication in terms that are not themselves vague. These two approaches are in turn linked to two more general tendencies in the literature on poetics and rhetoric: what we can think of as the "classical" and the "romantic".

The classical tradition is inherited largely from Greek and Roman rhetorical practices Its influences are not felt only in what are usually thought of as the "traditional" theories of literature and communication. On the classical view of communication, something is either communicated or it is not. What is communicated is usually assumed to be a determinate set of specific assumptions that are capable of being literally true or false. Moreover, the norm in communication is assumed to be one of *literal truthfulness*; and figurative language is seen as deriving its power and effects by its deviation from this norm. The implication for the

analysis of figurative language in particular, and literature in general, is that what is communicated can be spelled out as a determinate, literal message which can be more or less pleasingly, more or less decoratively put.

The roots of the romantic tradition are shallower. The Romantic poets and writers attacked the basis of the classical tradition - the norm of literal truthfulness - and by denying that language had any literal meaning they drew attention to the pervasiveness of figurative language in ordinary conversation. For critics and theorists in the romantic tradition, meaning is *always* context-dependent; that is, always the result of relationships between people and institutions, rather than inherent in words or expressions themselves.[32] Many "reader-response" and "deconstructionist" critics, as well as some of those who have attempted psychoanalytic criticism, can be understood as heirs of the Romantics.

Sperber and Wilson, in a series of writings, have argued, in essence, for a classical view of semantics, combined with a romantic view of pragmatics. In other words, they argue that the sentences of a language can encode determinate, context-independent meanings, which form the input to pragmatic inference processes. However, they side with the romantics in rejecting the norm of literal truthfulness, according to which sentences should properly be used only to convey their determinate, context-independent meanings. They argue that from this semantically-encoded input, pragmatic inference processes can construct very rich, and vague, interpretations; they argue further that the construction of such interpretations is not a departure from the norm, that it is, indeed, essential to communication.[33]

On this approach, what is communicated by any utterance or text is "linguistically underdetermined": in other words, understanding *what is communicated* is not simply a matter of decoding its linguistically-encoded meaning. Sometimes, as with ambiguity, the audience is intended nonetheless to recover a determinate proposition and assume that this is part of what the speaker intended to communicate. Sometimes, as with an utterance like "I did something", this proposition is rather vague and general, and the audience may be

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[32] For discussion by the proponents of various schools of thought, see Fabb, Attridge, Durant and McCabe (1987); for a summary of some of the relevance-theoretic approaches to the questions raised, see Sperber and Wilson (1986a: especially chapter 4), Pilkington (1992, 1994), Wilson and Sperber (1992).

[33] For more detailed arguments on this subject, see Pilkington (1992, 1994) Blakemore (1992), Carston (1988) and Kempson (1988b)see also Sperber and Wilson (1986a), "Loose talk" (Sperber and Wilson 1986b) and "Representation and relevance" (Wilson and Sperber 1988).

expected to narrow it down to something more precise. Sometimes, as with deliberate equivocation, it is impossible to pick out a single, determinate proposition that the communicator intended to communicate. Sometimes, as with sighs and gestures, nothing determinate is *said*, but something, however vague, is implicitly *communicated.* In this chapter, I will look at some of these types of indeterminacy and vagueness in literary works, and see how they affect our understanding of literary interpretation.

2. Indeterminacy and explicatures

As noted above and in Chapter 1 (sections 4.1 and 4.2), what is communicated by an utterance or text is, in general, linguistically underdetermined. Pragmatic inference is needed to determine both what the communicator intended to say, and what she intended to imply (see Chapter 1, sections 6.1 and 6.2). Sometimes, a determinate proposition is expressed; in such a case, the audience should be capable of inferring exactly what the speaker intended to say. At other times, no determinate proposition is expressed. This can happen with fragmentary or ungrammatical utterances, or with exclamations, such as (1):

(1) Ah, the smell of bread baking!

Here, among the propositions the speaker might have intended to communicate are

(2a) Ah, I love the smell of bread baking!

(2b) Ah, the smell of bread baking appeals to me!

(2c) Ah, the smell of bread baking reminds me of childhood!

and so on. There's no reason to think that the hearer is expected to choose one and only one of these. (1) is a case of indeterminacy at the level of the proposition expressed.

We may think of vagueness as roughly equivalent to indeterminacy. Nevertheless, we may want to distinguish between them at certain times. For example, "I did something" expresses a determinate proposition which is itself quite vague, because it can be made true in a lot of different ways. Sometimes, the communicator intends nothing more precise than the vague proposition she has expressed.. At other times, the hearer is expected to exclude *some* possibilities in interpreting this proposition, and come to a more or less precise understanding of the sort of thing the communicator had in mind. Resolution of vagueness, like disambiguation and reference assignment, is one of the pragmatic processes that may be needed to determine what was said. We see then that there are several ways in which

indeterminacy may be a factor in utterance interpretation.

Recall the distinction between what an utterance says and what it implies. What an utterance says may be a determinate proposition which may itself be more or less vague, or, as in (1), it may not be a determinate proposition at all. Likewise, the implicatures of an utterance, may be determinate, vague, or indeterminate. It's important to note that the degree of determinacy at the level of what an utterance says does not entail a corresponding degree of determinacy at the level of what is implicated. That is, an utterance which says something quite determinate may have indeterminate implicatures; and an utterance which says something rather vague may have fairly determinate implicatures. A theory of communication should allow for all these various combinations. To illustrate, let us look first at explicatures, or explicit communication.

According to Wilson and Sperber (1993), an utterance usually has several explicatures. An explicature is "constructed by enriching a linguistically encoded logical form to a point where it expresses a determinate proposition" (Wilson and Sperber 1993: 5). We can see how this description of explicatures works, and how linguistic underdeterminacy permeates every aspect of communication, if we look at examples taken from Yeats' *Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop* and Blake's *The Sick Rose*. As we shall see, not every utterance, even in planned literary texts, expresses a fully determinate proposition.

As I'll be discussing both poems in more detail throughout this chapter, it's as well to give the full texts here:

(3)

I met the Bishop on the road
And much said he and I.
"Those breasts are flat and fallen now,
Those veins must soon be dry;
Live in a heavenly mansion,
Not in some foul sty."

"Fair and foul are near of kin,
"And fair needs foul," I cried.
"My friends are gone, but that's a truth
Nor grave nor bed denied,
Learned in bodily lowliness
And in the heart's pride.

"A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
And nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent."

(4) O Rose, thou art sick!
The invisible worm
That flies in the night,
In the howling storm,

Has found out thy bed
Of crimson joy:
And his dark, secret love
Does thy life destroy.

The point I want to make here is that what is explicitly communicated can be more or less determinate, more or less vague. Let's begin by looking at a line from the Yeats poem.

(5) I met the Bishop on the road.

Assuming that the identities of speaker and Bishop are known, (5) expresses the determinate proposition in (6):

(6) Crazy Jane met the Bishop on the road.

This proposition can then be embedded under verbs of saying or believing to produce further explicatures:

(7a) Crazy Jane says she met the Bishop on the road.

(7b) Crazy Jane believes she met the Bishop on the road.

(7c) Crazy Jane is telling someone that she met the Bishop on the road.

Assuming Crazy Jane is a sincere communicator, (7a-c) are some of the higher-level explicatures of (6). At the level of explicit communication, then, this utterance is fairly determinate as long as we know the identities of the people concerned. The fact is, though, that we have little idea who Crazy Jane and the Bishop are, and this is where the element of indeterminacy comes in.

By contrast, if we look at the Blake poem, we find this anomalous line:

(8) The invisible worm ... has found out thy bed of crimson joy.

Assigning reference to "thy", we get (9):

(9) The invisible worm has found out the sick rose's bed of crimson joy.

There is nothing in our knowledge of worms, roses, beds, etc, that allows us to understand (8) as a description of any actual or conceivable state of affairs. No determinate proposition is expressed by (8), not merely because of referential indeterminacy, but because what is linguistically encoded is anomalous. We can say that both (6) and (8) are cases of vague communication, but the reasons are different in each case. It is also clear that different inferential strategies are required in each case; because (8) encodes something anomalous, the reader must do a good deal more in the way of work in order to recognise the intended interpretation.

For teachers of literature, it is worth noting that the distinction between determinate and indeterminate communication, and between the various causes and degrees of indeterminacy applies, even at the level of explicit communication. Many students at the outset of their careers will attempt to derive fully-determinate propositions from (6) and (8). In the first case, we lack sufficient contextual resources (about time, place, person and so on). Students will be tempted to supply them, and so are likely to produce interpretations otherwise unwarranted by the evidence provided by the poem. Their attempts will not usually seriously distort the writer's intention, although they may go beyond it in ways the writer had not foreseen. They may also attempt to resolve the anomalies of (8) by forcing a determinate proposition in its place. In this case, though, they must supply not just details of time, place, person and so on, but an imaginative narrative which may well distort the writer's intention. In the first case, unwarranted specificity is introduced; in the second, wholesale fabrication takes place. In both cases, something rich and vague is reduced to something precise, yet more impoverished. In a sense, the students are doing what many modern theories of communication do: eliminating intended indeterminacies from consideration.

The attempt to reduce a literary work to a set of determinate propositions produces another result. Recall that an utterance may be indeterminate at the implicit as well as the explicit level. Far more important to the question of literary interpretation is vagueness in implicit communication, to which I now turn.

3. Indeterminacy and implicatures

Vagueness at the level of implicatures is not just important for literary interpretation; it is also exploited in spontaneous comprehension. I have claimed that the implicatures of an utterance, like the proposition expressed, can be more or less determinate. In the following exchange, for example, Mary produces an utterance that expresses a fully determinate proposition, but implicates something quite vague:

(10a) Peter: What do you want to do tonight?

(10b) Mary: I have to be home by ten o'clock.

What exactly does Mary want to do? Her utterance excludes some possibilities and allows for others. As an answer to Peter's question, it's quite vague. Contrast this with the exchange in (11a-b), where Mary implicates a definite, if indirect, answer to Peter's question:

(11a) Peter: Were you born in England?

(11b) Mary: I was born in Paris.

The implication Mary intends Peter to draw from (11b), that she was not born in England, is quite determinate. That she has indirectly and implicitly communicated this proposition does not affect its determinacy.

Unlike (1), (10b) explicitly expresses a fully determinate proposition. But note that (10b) is not a direct answer to Peter's question, for Mary has not communicated exactly what she would like to do tonight. By producing (10b), Mary encourages Peter to think in a certain way about what she would like to do, restricting himself to those activities which will allow her to be home by ten o'clock. Peter may have been thinking to himself that Mary likes *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, which is showing in the neighbourhood, and have been wondering if she would like to see it. He would then have the following context easily accessible:

(12) Mary likes *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.*

(13a) There is a midnight showing of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* at the Roxy.

(13b) Mary may want to see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show.*

Given these assumptions as a context in which to process (10b), Peter will be able to conclude

(14) Mary does not want to go to this show tonight.

Indeed, he should draw this conclusion. Mary's utterance will thus achieve relevance by contradicting and eliminating an existing assumption of his. However, there are also other possibilities which Mary's utterance encourages him to consider. If he supplies the

assumptions

(15) There is an early showing of *The Krays* that finishes at nine o'clock.

(16) The Byzantine Exhibition at the British Museum is extended to ten o'clock this evening.

then he may conclude

(17) Mary may want to see *The Krays*.

(18) Mary may want to go to the Byzantine Exhibition at the British Museum.

and so on. Some of these conclusions may be ruled out on other grounds. If Mary objects to violent films, then Peter will likely reject (17), even though it is something Mary could do and still be home by ten o'clock.

It may well happen that there is no activity that Mary would obviously like that will allow her to be home in time. In that case, (10b) achieves relevance in two ways. First of all, it would rule out a large number of possible activities. Secondly, it would allow Peter to conclude for himself that there is nothing Mary may want to do, while simultaneously understanding why Mary will not go out this evening. Mary has produced a relevant utterance which achieves relevance precisely because of its indeterminate set of implicatures.

What exactly has Mary communicated? She does not specifically communicate any of (12-18), or any of the other assumptions implicated by (10b) that concern the list of possible activities in the sense that she may have had none of these propositions specifically in mind. However, she does rule out a great many possibilities, and encourages him to think of others. This is a significant contextual effect: overturning existing assumptions and making others more accessible, which makes her utterance sufficiently relevant under the circumstances. This is a quite ordinary type of vague communication. The question is, how exactly should it be described, in such a way as to preserve its vagueness rather than destroying it by reducing it to something more precise?

A theory of communication based on the code model can neither describe nor explain vague communication. A relevance-theoretic approach, by contrast, offers natural descriptions and explanations. Furthermore, a relevance-theoretic approach applies equally to literary and non-literary texts. In fact, what we discover about indeterminacy in spontaneous comprehension can shed light on how and why literary communication relies so heavily on vague communication. Before we proceed to examine the Blake and Yeats poems, I will therefore look briefly at how vague communication works in spontaneous

comprehension.

Let's return to (10b). In (10b), we have a case of communication that is determinate at the level of explicit communication, but vague at the level of implicit communication. The case is a quite ordinary one. How is this vagueness to be described? Within the relevance-theoretic framework, communication is seen as affecting the audience by intentionally altering the accessibility of, and evidence for, a whole range of possible thoughts (ie, by altering the audience's cognitive environment).

Some utterances are clearly intended to make a small range of thoughts highly accessible, and provide strong evidence for them. At the opposite extreme, some utterances are clearly intended to make a very wide range of thoughts just a little more accessible, and to provide just a little more evidence for each of them. Between these two extremes lie a whole range of possibilities. (10b), for example, is clearly intended to communicate one determinate proposition - that Mary wants to be home by ten o'clock. But Mary also clearly wants this determinate proposition to increase the accessibility of and evidence for further thoughts, having to do with what she would like to do that evening. The wider the range of thoughts, and the less strongly each of them is evidenced, the vaguer the communication will be. Indeterminacy of implicatures (or explicatures) is thus analysed in relevance theory in terms of (a) the manifestness of the communicator's intentions; (b) the range of propositions made more accessible or more evidenced by the act of communication; and (c) the degree to which the accessibility to and evidence for each of these propositions is increased. I will look at these factors in more detail below.

In poetry, this same phenomenon is also exploited. As in spontaneous comprehension, we have several possible combinations: both explicatures and implicatures may be more or less determinate or vague. Let's consider first a case where a fairly determinate proposition is expressed and used to convey a fairly indeterminate range of implicatures. In the Yeats poem the speaker tells us that

(19) Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement.

This utterance is not quite as straightforward as (6), because of the personification of "Love". Already the reader's imagination is engaged, because (19) is a slightly anomalous utterance in that love is an emotion, not a person. The closest literal paraphrase may be something like the following (though we should note that it takes both knowledge and imagination to get there):

(20) The sexual and excretory organs are collocated in human beings.

(20) is a useful paraphrase, because it may give the reader access to (21):

(21) The collocation of the sexual and excretory organs is considered shameful in Western cultures.

This in turn may give us access to assumptions about each of these functions separately, and about their collocation:

(22) The emotional aspects of the sexual function are highly regarded in Western cultures.

(23) The emotional aspects of the excretory function cause shame in Western cultures.

(24) Human anatomy is such that the physical expression of desire and love involves proximity to the shame-inducing excretory organs.

(20-24) may help explain the line, but they do so at the cost of almost complete destruction of its poetic effect. Nevertheless, we can persevere in this vein to see if there are other assumptions that give some insight into what is communicated by (19).

The use of the word "mansion", for example, provides access to another line of thought:

(25) Mansions are grand and expensive houses.

(26) Mansions are owned and built by rich, powerful or influential people.

(27) Rich, powerful or influential people can build their houses where they want.

If the reader uses (25-27) as part of the context in which he processes (19), he may arrive at the contextual implication that

(28) Love has built his mansion where he chose.

Suitably paraphrased, this can produce

(29) Love has chosen the site of his physical expression - in close proximity to the shameful excretory organs - because he wanted to.

Now we know that love, being an emotion, cannot have intentions about anything. Let us paraphrase again so as to remove this figurative aspect:

(30) There is a purpose or significance to the collocation of the sexual and excretory organs.

We can derive from (30) a very large number of conclusions, including the contradictory but so far equally supported (31-32):

(31) The intention is not to denigrate the emotional aspects of sex.

(32) The intention is precisely to denigrate the emotional aspects of sex.

Only further processing of the entire poem, including continued extension of the context, as well as processing of the assumptions accessed or derived as a result, will cause the reader to accept either (31) or (32): or to derive implicatures unconnected to either.

In any event, the implications of this multiply in very much the same way as they did for (10b). (12-18) are examples of the implicatures Peter might derive, any subset of which may make Mary's utterance relevant enough for him. Similarly, (10b) closes off other, highly accessible lines of interpretation (all those activities that will not let Mary get home by ten o'clock), a powerful contextual effect in itself. In the same way, (19) gives access to several lines of interpretation besides the few I indicated in my development of the paraphrase. Anti-Church sentiments, for example, become accessible if we develop (31) in a context consisting of Catholic teachings about sexual activity and morality. The writer also makes accessible assumptions about the dangers inherent in the expression of love: that desire is easily debased.

So we can see how a poetic utterance, such as (19), which like (10b) expresses a fairly determinate proposition, can be used to communicate an indeterminate *range* of implicatures. We can think of vague communication as encouraging certain *lines* of interpretation rather than communicating definite messages. Moreover, the main difference between the prosaic (10b) and the poetic (19) is that the reader of (19) is encouraged to explore and savour its implicatures in a way that the hearer of (10b) is not.

4. Communicating impressions and emotions

I have argued that Yeats wants the reader of his poem to think about assumptions we may entertain about the "fair" and "foul" aspects of the body, and may even want us to widen our interpretation to include attitudes toward the body in general. But though the set of assumptions is rather vague, they are still assumption which lie on the intellectual rather than the emotional side. In other cases, the writer may want to communicate images, impressions, emotions and other "non-propositional" objects. How can we account for these?

Let's return for a moment to (1):

(1) Ah, the smell of bread baking!

While (1) is in no sense anomalous, we have seen that it does not express a fully determinate proposition. By the same token, no determinate set of propositions is implicated. Instead, the speaker marginally increases the manifestness of a very wide range of assumptions. As a result, she alters the hearer's cognitive environment, but not by adding to it any determinate "message". Peter may sniff, for example, and access a very wide range of assumptions which were manifest to him before, but are now *more* manifest. These may include memories of other times when he has smelled bread baking, which may allow him to recall the emotions and sensations he experienced at those times. These assumptions and emotions may relate to home, to people he recalls who made bread, to the experience of eating newly-baked bread, and so on along a very wide range of implicatures which may, some of them, be quite vague. He must assume that Mary is experiencing similar thoughts and feelings.

How does (1) differ from (10b) and (19)? In (10b), relevance may well have been achieved by ruling out a large set of possible activities, and hence by placing constraints on Peter's list of things Mary may want to do. In (19), relevance is achieved by encouraging the reader to think along certain lines which are again relatively well-defined.

(1), however, is quite different. Though it is not anomalous, I will argue that it shares certain features with many anomalous utterances: these are connected with the fact that neither expresses a fully determinate proposition, whose relevance is to be established in fairly obvious ways. So (1) is markedly different from (10b) and (19), which do seem to communicate more or less determinate intentions as to the lines along which interpretation is to go. The first conveys an answer (though a vague one) to a question; the second prompts the reader to develop an interpretation that is intended to alter his assumptions about sexuality and shame. The intention behind (1), however, cannot be narrowed down even so far as that.

Similarly, if we take the anomalous utterance (8), we will see that it, like (1), achieves relevance by communicating an *impression*; that is, by marginally altering the manifestness of a very wide range of assumptions:

(8) The invisible worm ... has found out thy bed of crimson joy.

In processing (8), we may construct a very large context containing a very wide range of assumptions about, and images of, worms, crimson, joy, beds, and invisibility. To increase the chances of relevance, we may seek out assumptions which will combine two or more of these subjects. Thus we may, among other assumptions, come up with these:

(33) Worms appear on corrupted bodies.

(34) Blood, which is red (or crimson), is hidden within a living body, but is released from a dead body when the barrier of the skin is breached.

(35) The activity of worms may release blood from corrupting bodies.

(36) Roses are often crimson (or red), the colour of blood.

(37) Red roses, because of their colour and texture, may remind us of heart's blood and tissue.

(38) Invisible things cannot be guarded against.

(39) The invisible worm attacks the living rose's core just as it attacks the flesh of dead and corrupted bodies.

Some of these assumptions will in turn trigger feelings of unease or horror, which will lead on to further contexts, and so on indefinitely. Emotions and images can be regarded as condensing a huge range of assumptions. In that way they achieve relevance by making a very wide range of assumptions marginally more manifest in a highly economical way.

Now, none of (33-39) need be entertained in the form I have given them. Clearly, though, (8) makes them more manifest than they were before (8) was uttered or read. Thus (36) may be made only slightly more accessible than before, since it is easy to access and a commonplace observation anyway. (37) is not so commonplace an observation, and it is made much more manifest than it was before. But the most striking cognitive effects of (8) may be accessed via the sensations of dis-ease, or horror, which colour everything they touch.

This discussion raises several questions, about cognitive environments, strength and weakness of implicatures and communication, and accessibility, all of which will be taken up in detail in succeeding sections. For now, let's recall that in Chapter 1, we looked briefly at the notion of cognitive environments. There I claimed, following Sperber and Wilson (1986), that a cognitive environment consists of all the assumptions a reader is capable of entertaining as true or probably true at a given time. The assumptions themselves will be accessible to differing degrees: some are more easily accessed - more *manifest* - than others. Implicatures are those assumptions which the reader is intended to access as part of the intended context, or derive as the result of processing the text in the intended context. Implicatures also have degrees of strength. They may be strongly implicated: that is, the evidence may lead the reader to *decide* that the writer almost certainly intended him to entertain this assumption. They may be easily accessed: that is, they can be called up from

memory, constructed in the process of constructing the context, or derived from processing the text in the context, with a minimum of effort.

Recall, too, that communication is a matter of altering the reader's cognitive environment, rather than of replicating thoughts. I argued that the writer aims to alter the reader's cognitive environment in one of three ways. She may want to add new assumptions; she may want to strengthen existing assumptions; or she may want to contradict and eliminate existing assumptions. If we see communication as a process intended to produce these alterations - which are all types of *contextual effects* - we see that successful communication can result when a writer makes clear her intention to alter her reader's cognitive environment in a particular way. This alteration need not mean the introduction of a determinate set of propositions that are identical with those the writer had in mind; it may mean altering the strength or manifestness of a large and indefinite range of assumptions, or producing a wide range of very weak implicatures. The reader presumes (as he is entitled to) that the interpretation he is intended to recognise is one that is consistent with the principle of relevance: that is, that should enable him to achieve adequate effects with no unjustifiable effort, in a way the writer could manifestly have foreseen.

We will consider how this view of communication provides an understanding of poetic effects and indeterminacy in literary interpretation. First, though, I would like to discuss a more immediate issue. If we are to count all the above examples as genuine cases of communication, then the problem of responsibility is raised. How much is the writer responsible for these interpretations? How much is the reader? Is there any way in which we can talk of responsibility being shared? None of these questions can be answered without examining the notion of cognitive environment in more detail.

5. Cognitive environments

Most theorists assume that something is either communicated or it is not. If we start with the belief that communication consists of inducing a thought in someone, then either that thought is induced or it is not. If, however, we see communication in a different way, then we can look at vagueness differently, too. In particular, we can think of communication succeeding *to a degree*, in ways for which both writer and reader share responsibility.

Pettersson (1988) summarized four variant readings of Gray's *Elegy* (see Chapter Four

and Appendix B). Some assumptions are shared by all four interpretations; others by one or two; one interpretation may contradict assumptions expressed or conclusions reached by the others. Clearly, Gray could not have intended each of these interpretations, including contradictory ones. Each of the interpretations, then, can be said to have succeeded in identifying the writer's intentions to a degree. This view of communication as succeeding *to a degree* is central to an understanding of vague communication, and of the role of indeterminacy in communication. For Sperber and Wilson, it is best explained if we look at communication as an attempt by the communicator to affect and alter her audience's *cognitive environment.* It is to this notion that I now turn.

Following Sperber and Wilson (1986a), we can think of a cognitive environment in the following way. At any given time during a person's waking moments, he has a set of assumptions accessible to him given his physical surroundings and his mental abilities. A person's cognitive environment at a given moment can be said to consist of all the assumptions he can entertain and accept as true or probably true at that moment. The person's cognitive environment consists of *what he can perceive*, and *what he is capable of inferring*, in a given situation.

As I write this in my office, I have access to a host of assumptions that I may or may not entertain. For example, I can, if I want, see to my left *The Complete Poetry & Prose of William Blake* (1982). By looking at it, I gain access to a host of assumptions: the fact that I bought the book in 1982 at a Blake exhibit in Toronto; my recollection of some of the prints on display and my responses to them; my recollection of the person I attended the show with; the fact that the book is out of its usual place in the office; and so on. We can say that all of these assumptions (and a great many others about Blake, about the poems and prose works I have read, about Toronto) are *manifest* to me in this situation: that is, I can represent them mentally at this moment, and accept them as true or probably true.

An assumption does not actually have to be entertained to be manifest. I can infer, from seeing the book in front of me, that it is not an exhibit in a murder trial in Toronto. This assumption, which I can represent mentally and accept as true or probably true, follows from the fact that the book is lying in my office. The assumption is manifest to me, but is probably one that I will not entertain. According to Sperber and Wilson, assumptions differ in their degree of manifestness: the more manifest an assumption, the more likely it is to be entertained.

Or consider another example. It is true that, as I write, rain is falling outside my window. It had been falling for some time before I noticed it. The fact that the rain was falling was manifest to me, even though I had not paid attention to the sounds and so could not be said to know that it was raining. It was not manifest *enough* to come to my attention.

So my cognitive environment consists of all the assumptions that are manifest to me to varying degrees: that I can potentially entertain, and accept as true or probably true at a given time. We can see how this notion might be important to the interpretation of literary works. Even short literary works like poems are notorious for producing a very wide range of interpretations, and as I have noted, these interpretations can differ widely. A good deal of effort has been expended in literary theories in deciding which of these many interpretations is the "correct" one, or in showing why all interpretations have precisely the same value (which is, none at all). Much of this contention stems from the assumption that there is a single, determinate interpretation which the poet wanted to induce in the reader's mind, that she wanted all her readers to represent. According to Sperber and Wilson, we should abandon this assumption.

Let us assume instead that the writer or speaker is trying to alter, not the thoughts of the reader or hearer, but his cognitive environment, by trying to make certain assumptions manifest, or more manifest. Now, two people may be in very similar cognitive environments, but be actually entertaining different thoughts. In particular, they could be reading the same work but entertaining different thoughts, all of which could fall within the range that the writer intended to make manifest, or more manifest. The smaller the range of assumptions, and the more manifest they are, the more likely it is that the reader will actually construct and entertain them; conversely, the larger the range, and the less manifest they are, the more likely it is that interpretations will differ, while still falling within the intended range.

The "success" of the communication between the writer and reader will not then depend primarily on whether the reader has replicated some specifically intended set of thoughts the writer intended. Instead, a successful interpretation will be one that includes a set of assumptions that falls within the range intended by the writer. By treating as "the" interpretation something that merely falls within the intended range, the reader goes beyond what is strictly warranted, and must take some of the responsibility for himself. In just the same way, if Peter infers from Mary's utterance in (10b) that she wants to spend the evening at *The Krays*, he must take some of the responsibility for himself.

We are back to the idea of acceptability of interpretations, which rests, as I have argued on recognition of the writer's intention. To the extent that communication is vague, responsibility for choosing a particular interpretation falls on the reader. I will argue that, as with the ordinary utterance in (10b), the speaker or writer may generally be seen more as placing constraints on the range of possible interpretations, than communicating a definite message. To the extent that the reader or hearer makes a particular choice within the intended range, he must take some responsibility for the particular interpretation chosen.

This raises the question, though, of how we are to know what range of assumptions - whether large or small - the writer intended to communicate. Here, recall the point I made in the first chapter: that the writer provides evidence of her intentions in the work. I want now to argue that we can connect determinacy or indeterminacy of communication with degrees of manifestness of the writer's intentions.

Consider (10b) again. Mary takes the major responsibility for eliminating all activities that will keep her from returning home by ten o'clock. That intention is strongly communicated. But which activities are these? It may be strongly manifest (totally obvious) that she will therefore not want to fly the Atlantic that evening: but consider an activity that *may* just get her home by ten. Is it excluded or permitted? Whichever decision Peter makes, part of the responsibility for making it will fall on him. The reason is that Mary's intention regarding this activity is made only very weakly manifest. In the same way, the list of alternatives - all the things she could do and be home by ten - is extremely large. Some, like an early dinner, are easily accessed. Others, like re-arranging the kitchen shelves, are less easily accessed; and once accessed, it will still fall on Peter to decide whether these are activities that Mary would like. Again, her intentions regarding these activities are more or less weakly communicated: and the more difficult they are to access, the more numerous the possibilities, and the less evidence there is for them, the weaker the communication will be, and the more responsibility Peter must take for his decision about Mary's intention. If he decides that Mary wants to spend the evening re-arranging her kitchen shelves, then he must take most of the responsibility for that interpretation.

Let us return to the difference between (10b) and (1). What exactly was Mary trying to communicate in saying (1)? Here there is no obvious answer: nothing is definitely excluded, nothing definitely brought to Peter's mind in a way that Mary could manifestly have foreseen. Whatever is communicated is very weakly communicated, and according to

relevance theory, that is what makes the difference between (1) and (10b). A weakly communicated assumption makes very little alteration in the hearer's cognitive environment. If relevance is to be achieved by weak communication, then, a huge range of assumptions must be affected if the result is to be relevant enough. For Sperber and Wilson, this is how impressions, emotions, and attitudes are analyzed. An impression of a beautiful scene, for example, cannot be spelt out in a few - or even many - words. What makes a scene beautiful is a huge array of tiny visual effects, each of which alters the perceiver's cognitive environment by giving him access to a range of assumptions. When I sigh and draw your attention to a beautiful scene, I merely make each of these assumptions marginally more accessible - marginally more manifest. For Sperber and Wilson, that is how vague communication - whether spontaneous or literary - works (see Sperber and Wilson 1981a, 1986a, 1986b, 1987; and Wilson and Sperber 1986a, 1988b, 1992).

6. Degrees of manifestness and poetic effects

It has been my experience as a teacher that most of my perceptions of the evidence of a poem are accepted by most of my students. In relevance-theoretic terms, these facts and inferences which are manifest to me, and which I represent mentally as assumptions, are also manifest to my students. It is also my experience that most of my students do not perceive most of these facts *until* I point them out: before the discussion, these assumptions were not manifest enough to be noticed; after, they became very strongly manifest. The role of the interpreter, especially in literary interpretations, is often to make assumptions which are weakly manifest more manifest.

When this strengthening occurs, and the reader accepts the interpretation, or those aspects made more strongly manifest by the interpreter, the reader often experiences a sense of inevitability: that the writer could not have intended any other interpretation than the one reached by the interpreter or critic. When, however, the reader does understand the critic's point, but does not believe that the work makes these assumptions strongly manifest, he will resist the interpretation. Equally, he may accept the premises, but believe that the writer did not intend to communicate the conclusions the critic has reached. Manifestness, then, plays a major role in the evaluation of interpretations, and standards of acceptability.

Consider the case of typical student interpretations of Shakespeare's *Sonnet 73*.

(40) That time of year thou mayst in me behold
When yellow leaves, or none, or few, do hang
Upon those boughs which shake against the cold,
Bare ruined choirs, where late the sweet birds sang.
In me thou see'st the twilight of such day
As after sunset fadeth in the west;
Which by and by black night doth take away,
Death's second self, which seals up all in rest.
In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire,
That on the ashes of his youth doth lie,
As the deathbed whereon it must expire,
Consumed with that which it was nourished by.
This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

The majority of my students initially arrive at an interpretation of that poem which, though extremely general and impressionistic, is not incompatible with what I believe is the intended interpretation. They sense the poet's melancholy, and connect it with both physical decline and a love affair he is involved in. Most readers cannot at first develop their interpretations beyond this point. However, with very few exceptions over the years, every student perceives - after I have pointed it out - that the three quatrains each describe a separate process at a similar stage in its development. The first quatrain describes late autumn; the second describes twilight; the third describes a dying fire on the point of falling into embers. Every student also perceives (after I have pointed it out) that the speaker is explicitly comparing himself to each one of these states or processes ("That time of year thou mayest in me behold"; "In me thou see'st the twilight of such day"; "In me thou see'st the glowing of such fire").

There are two interesting aspects to this experience, which most teachers of literature will share during their years in the classroom. The first is the almost universal acceptance of these perceptions and assumptions, an acceptance which cannot be accounted for merely by the authority of the professor (invariably a few students will fail to perceive, or resist perceiving, what I have pointed out to them). As well, those students who do not perceive and accept the conclusions I discuss in class, but who do not publicly disagree, demonstrate the fact by their inability to explain them or incorporate them into a coherent interpretation.

They will faithfully reproduce my assertions in their essays, but can't do anything except reproduce them. A relevance-theoretic approach accounts for this phenomenon of "parroting" by arguing that such students cannot exploit the new concepts or assumptions by constructing contexts in which they will reach contextual implications not previously given them by their professor: they demonstrate, in fact, that the new material has little relevance for them.

The second interesting aspect of this experience is the students' reactions when they have been shown something which was manifest to but not perceived by them. Almost universally they want to know how their teacher was able to perceive so easily that which was initially invisible to them. In the case of *Sonnet 73*, students are distressed that they were unable to perceive something so obvious. Their reaction confirms that the facts were indeed manifest beforehand, although not accessible enough to be actually entertained.

An account of typical student reactions will touch on the two areas I am concerned with in this chapter. By describing interpretation as the alteration of the reader's cognitive environment, we can see not only how vagueness works, but also why a writer would choose vague communication. Moreover, if we can account for vagueness in a theory of communication, we can also see how an attempt to "strengthen" vague implicatures or intentions into a determinate set of propositions destroys precisely the effect the writer is attempting to achieve. Let's turn to the notion of strength, or degree, to see how this might work.

Usually, when discussing vagueness in poetry, critics will talk of a poem's being "allusive". In pragmatic terms, the critic claims that the poet is relying on implicit rather than explicit communication. In relevance-theoretic terms, "allusiveness", or "poetic vagueness", can be analyzed using the notion of weak implicature. Recall that an implicature is a contextual premise or a contextual implication which is part of the intended interpretation. Implicatures are assumptions which the reader is intended to access in constructing the context, or are conclusions which he is intended to derive as a result of processing the newly-presented information (here, the poem) in the intended context. The strength of an implicature depends on the amount of evidence the speaker provides for it: that is, how obvious she makes her intention that it *should* be used. The more obvious the intention, the stronger the implicature; the less obvious the intention, the weaker the implicature, and the more implicatures will be needed to establish optimal relevance.

Implicatures can be very weak indeed. In that case, if a work is to achieve relevance,

then it has to make a very wide range of such implicatures more manifest. Precisely because such implicatures require an "extra" degree of processing effort to access, they are generally overlooked by casual readers (such as students). If we look at the implicatures which constitute part of my interpretation of *Sonnet 73*, we find that just those implicatures which the students never miss are the strongest conceivable ones.

Let's look first at the strong implicatures. A strongly-implicated assumption is one which it is obvious that the utterance makes very easily accessible. Recall that, as the reader tries to recognise the intended interpretation, he constructs a context in which the utterance will yield adequate contextual effects without unjustifiable effort, in a way the communicator could reasonably have foreseen. Those implicatures which are most readily accessible in this way are strongly implicated. They are the basis for most student interpretations of the poem, which, as described above, are both generalised and pretty brief. The typical interpretation goes something like this: "The speaker is sad because he is ill (or suffering from some physical weakness) and because a love affair isn't working out." When pressed for evidence for their interpretations, students will point to the syntactically difficult lines "This thou perceiv'st, which makes thy love more strong,/To love that well which thou must leave ere long".

Most casual readers (including my students) will offer the first interpretation which is easy to produce, even if it leaves some of the evidence unaccounted for. In relevance-theoretic terms, such an interpretation achieves some minimal degree of relevance, though it falls short of optimal relevance. A reader could expand this first context, but that would cost more effort, and when the reader hasn't adequate contextual resources (encyclopaedic information, background knowledge, reading experience, or imagination), then this effort is not adequately rewarded and so the interpretive process is abandoned. The reader will disregard the quatrains of the sonnet as irrelevant, for he has produced a minimally adequate interpretation almost entirely from the couplet. Specifically, he will point to the phrases "thy love more strong", "love that well", and "thou must leave". Comparison of the typical underdeveloped interpretation with these phrases shows that the strongly manifest assumptions captured by the interpretation are paraphrases of the explicatures. (If it is objected that the readers have taken these elements out of context, and that this distorts the writer's intention, I agree: in fact, this is precisely my point. But we are less interested in whether students abide by the "rules" of sporting engagements in literature, and more in how

relevance theory can shed light on why they behave as they do, and how better to understand the process of teaching literary interpretation.)

Consequently, in the students' cognitive environment, these assumptions are strongly held. That is, it takes a great deal of effort, and the presentation of equally strong assumptions, to overturn them. It is particularly difficult to change them when the students have "filled in" the interpretation by attributing all sorts of intentions to the writer without the help of any evidence from the poem. These students will insist that the poem is clearly about a young man, dying of some desperate illness, who is sending his love away to avoid later heartbreak; or that he is an old man, whose equally aged wife has died; or that he is a man of indeterminate age whose lover has left him flat. These assumptions clearly differ from what I described above as generalised interpretations of the poem.

These assumptions, with their various degrees of strength, all derive from the concluding couplet. By focussing on the couplet, the students are avoiding the harder work of reaching those weaker implicatures which would lead them to a more accurate and richer interpretation of the poem. I call this work harder because, as we shall see, there is a good deal of mental labour required to access these implications. But, unlike the assumptions I have described, the weaker implicatures are very many and varied. We have the apparent paradox, then, that it is precisely those weaker implicatures, those *poetic effects*, which in range and number so greatly repay the work of literary interpretation. Being weaker, these assumptions will be weakly-evidenced, and there will be a great range of alternatives to choose from.[34] We can test this argument by looking in some detail at the implicatures the writer might have intended the reader to recover.

Let's turn to the weak implicatures which the three quatrains might yield.

(41) The speaker is frail and withered.

(42) The speaker feels his death approaching, and believes that death will be like falling asleep.

(43) The speaker's passionate life has consumed his youthfulness.

Each of (41-43) represents an interpretation of each quatrain. From the evidence of all three quatrains, we may further conclude

[34] This suggests why beginning readers, for whom certainty may be the most important goal, find literary interpretation, especially of poems, both daunting and boring. The changes in their own goals make the reading of literature more rewarding.

(44) The speaker's decline, though melancholy, is nevertheless natural.

Now this conclusion, though supported by the evidence of the quatrains, is not as strongly communicated, if only because a reader has to go to the trouble of comparing the processes described in (41-43), noticing that all three are descriptions of natural events, and that all three natural events are in the same stage of their process: that is, near the end. If we recall that relevance is a matter of both effect and effort, we can say that, although the effects recovered may well repay the "extra" effort required, the effort itself is pretty well set in advance. By "set", I mean that there is no short-cut in the comparison of these implicatures, no way to cut down on the actual effort involved in processing these new assumptions and reaching this complex conclusion.

To arrive at (44), then, is to have spent considerable cognitive effort for a rather weakly-manifest assumption. This assumption itself is not adequate payment for the efforts the reader will have to make to recover it. What, then, will make his efforts worthwhile?

(45) The speaker is explicitly comparing himself to each of three states or processes: autumn, twilight, a fire falling into embers ("That time of year thou mayest *in me* behold"; *"In m*e thou see'st the twilight of such day"; "*In me* thou see'st the glowing of such fire" - my italics).

Now, (45) is more strongly evidenced than any of (41-44), if only because the evidence for it is explicitly communicated. In addition, we have the fact that Shakespeare repeats a single phrase - "in me" - twice putting this repeated phrase at the head of a line, where it will most usually become the focus for the interpretation of that line or sentence.

Precisely because (45) is strongly evidenced, and because the repeated phrase "in me" attracts the reader's attention, we can assume that they are intended to contribute to overall relevance in the same way. This is where we can return to (40-45). Processing (45) in a context including (41-44), we may quite easily derive the following implications:

(46) The speaker is nearing the end of his life span.

(47) This end is neither unexpected nor unnatural, but represents the decline of a human being's life.

(48) The speaker is likely past whatever years represent the prime of life in his culture.

And there are many other conclusions the reader may be entitled to reach, such as that the source of the speaker's melancholy is his sense of his declining powers, his review of the life

that he has led, his doubts as to whether he has made good use of his time. When we add the explicitly-given contextual premise that he is addressing someone ("thou") whose love for him is "strong", we are entitled to add the conclusions that at least some of his melancholy derives from his sense that he is no longer able fully to enjoy (or to give enjoyment in) a love affair. And while, with the strong implicatures, the minimal effort expended results in a minimally relevant interpretation, the extra effort needed to reach these weaker implicatures results in a very much richer interpretation, which is itself optimally relevant.

How do these experiences support the claims I have been making about vagueness and indeterminacy in literature? To begin with, the implicatures I have mentioned, while they may resemble one another from interpreter to interpreter, are rarely identical (see Chapter 4). Secondly, the implicatures themselves are quite vague, leading on to still further, and weaker, implicatures (45-47). Thirdly, as each reader takes greater responsibility for his interpretation - that is, as he chooses among the range of assumptions more manifest - he is less entitled to believe that the writer intended this and only this interpretation.

What is crucial to successful communication is that the writer's intention becomes mutually manifest, and for this, the reader must be capable of accessing the assumptions necessary to recognize it. In *Sonnet 73*, we must not only perceive the resemblance between the speaker's condition and the states described in the poem; we must also recognize Shakespeare's intention to make this resemblance salient enough for us to notice. Assuming that he has not put us to gratuitous processing effort, we will then be entitled to treat this resemblance as intended to make some contribution to overall relevance. The most easily accessible interpretation that makes sense of *all* the evidence provided in the poem - that provides enough effects to repay the effort demanded, or could have been reasonably expected to do so - is the only one consistent with the principle of relevance.

I have argued that there is no reason to assume that the writer's intention is always recognized with the same degree of certainty. An intention (regarding a given contextual assumption or implicature) may thus be more or less easily recognized. Some implications may be immediately obvious; others may take more work, and the results may be less certain.[35] The more certainly the intention regarding a certain assumption is recognized, the

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[35] There is actually a strong critical perception that some of the results ought to be fairly uncertain. For example, C Day-Lewis comments that

(continued...)

more strongly that assumption is communicated; the lower the certainty, the less strongly that assumption is communicated. If the reader can see that the writer *might* have intended to communicate some proposition *P*, and then decides that the writer *does* mean *P*, then part of the responsibility for this interpretation rests with the reader.

7. Indeterminacy and poetic effects: Yeats

I have argued that communication involves the intention to alter the reader's cognitive environment by making manifest, or more manifest, a certain set of assumptions. I have also claimed that comprehension of an utterance or text involves recognition of this intention. As we have seen, the communicator's intention may be partly precise and partly vague: for example, she may intend to make manifest, or more manifest, the set of assumptions (P_1, P_2, P_3), and all the further assumptions manifestly needed to make that set relevant enough to be worth her audience's attention. One can imagine that even if all these assumptions did indeed become manifest or more manifest to different readers, they would not all become manifest to the same degree, given the existing differences in the cognitive capacities of different readers. Hence, different assumptions would actually be entertained, and reported, by different readers, even though all fell within the intended range of interpretations. This is one of the ways in which differences in interpretation may arise even though there is no element of misunderstanding.

Communication, then, rather than being intended to induce specific thoughts in the reader, involves making manifest the writer's intention to make some set of assumptions manifest or more manifest. Communication will succeed to the extent that the writer's intention does indeed become manifest: that is, to the extent that the audience is capable of recognising and accepting that this is, indeed, the writer's intention. As we have seen, the writer's intention may not be to make manifest a determinate set of propositions (P_1, P_2, P_3 - P_n). Instead, the writer may have in mind a description of the set which may be more or less vague. For example, in (1), the writer may intend "to make manifest all the thoughts which

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> The "meaning" of a poem is not what it would mean if translated into prose, but what it means to each reader when he translates it into the terms of his own spiritual experience. Poetry is above all a way of using words to say things which could not possibly be said in any other way. (C Day-Lewis 1947)

became manifest to me as a result of this experience."

As we have seen, in the case of (1), this set will be indefinitely large, and different subsets will become manifest in different degrees to different readers. If such is the case for a simple utterance like (1), then it is not surprising that complex literary texts will lead different readers to arrive at different interpretations. We see that relevance theory not only accounts for variation among interpretations; but, through the account of poetic effects as the marginal increase in a very wide range of assumptions in the reader's cognitive environment, it actually predicts such a situation.

The other thread I have been following in this chapter has to do with the relation of vagueness and indeterminacy to the reader's subjective experience of the poem. Although we can now describe what happens in vague communication, I have not dealt thoroughly with the idea that vagueness in poetry is actually essential to its effect. I have shown that the attempt to reduce literary texts to a set of determinate propositions falls short of what the writer intended. When a writer's intention is vague - that is, when the intended interpretation consists of weakly expressed propositions, weakly implicated assumptions, or impressions - then trying to make the interpretation fully determinate will destroy some of the intended effects.

I will briefly pursue this idea by looking at two poems in which something quite rich is being communicated, something that would be diminished or destroyed if we were to pin it down to a determinate paraphrase: Blake's *The Sick Rose* and Yeats' *Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop*. Let's begin with the Yeats poem.

Here I want to focus on the way in which Yeats puts opposites or contrasting ideas side by side. The Bishop contrasts "a heavenly mansion" with "some foul sty". Crazy Jane contrasts "fair and foul" twice; she points out that "Love" occurs in "The place of excrement" and claims that "nothing can be whole" (maintain its integrity) "or whole" (without perforation) that has not been "rent" (torn, disjointed). There are, in addition, implied contrasts. The fact that the Bishop says that Crazy Jane's breasts are "flat and fallen *now*" strongly suggests that they were quite the contrary before. We therefore contrast "flat and fallen" with "round and firm", or something similar.

There are also contrasts between Crazy Jane and the Bishop. Our knowledge of the world tells us that a Bishop occupies a position that is socially influential, important, respectable, and probably well-paid. Equally, we know that people who are called "crazy",

especially when that adjective becomes part of their usual name, generally have a low social status, are disreputable, poor and unreliable. Furthermore, we assume that a Bishop, by virtue of his office, is well-educated; that his opinions on matters of morality are well-informed and generally represent the widely-accepted thought of his contemporaries. On the other hand, someone acknowledged as "crazy" is by definition a person whose view of the world is affected by mental instability and distorted perceptual and cognitive processes; her opinions would not normally have the same weight as a Bishop's. As a result, we can infer that the title characters also represent a series of contrasts, both as individuals and as types.

All these assumptions are readily accessible to most readers of the poem, and are therefore fairly strongly communicated. They are also uncontroversial and many readers would accept them automatically. If Yeats had not intended us to entertain any of these assumptions, or reach any of these conclusions, then he would not have written the poem as he did. This, at least, is what relevance theory says: the writer should formulate her utterance so as to make the intended interpretation as easy as possible for her audience to recover.

We can only make this last statement if we assume that the contrasts I have described are noticeable to the reader as he works through the poem. And we must make such an assumption if we are to talk about the writer's intentions. The arguments of the first chapter about the connection between the writer's intentions and the reader's interpretation presume that both writer and reader can entertain similar assumptions. The evidence of the poem, plus the shared cognitive environment, is what permits the reader to entertain these assumptions. We assume, then, that the writer predicted just this situation; that, in fact, she wrote the poem for the purpose of bringing it about.

Having noticed this series of oppositions, the reader has then to make sense of it, and this is where indeterminacy comes in. There are many ways of spelling out the oppositions in terms of ideas about Christianity and sensuality, about the "foolish wisdom" of the mad, about the paradoxical relationship between corruption and pleasure, life and death. The evidence provided by the poem allows us to construct a context in which we can derive the assumption that our received notions of "good" and "bad", in matters both of sexual morality and of the relationship between good and evil, are contradicted by the evidence of our bodies and the world around us. We conclude, therefore, that Crazy Jane is right, and the Bishop is wrong. Since Yeats has put the conventional morality which he is criticising into the mouth of a "Bishop", we may further conclude that the pronouncements of the representatives

of the institutions that govern morality are inferior even to the ramblings of a crazy person. We are then invited to reconcile the apparent opposites mentioned in or implied by the poem by assuming that their relationship is complementary rather than opposed. We may be led by this to entertain the assumption that perhaps we do not need to choose one over the other. This idea itself has a huge range of implications which we are apparently invited to explore: that religions that oppose body and soul are bankrupt; that the natural world has its own sacredness; that men tend to dominate or oppose nature, while women attempt to reconcile opposing natural and social forces.

The difficulty of reducing what is communicated by a poem to a determinate set of propositions should now be obvious. This point is suggested by (19-32). Recall that Crazy Jane tells the Bishop that "Love has pitched his mansion in/The place of excrement." The contrast between the exalted nature of love (indicated by Yeats' personification of the state by making it a proper noun, and replacing it with a personal pronoun, "his") and the debased nature of its "near of kin" is strongly communicated because it is easily accessed, and as the fact is strongly manifest the conclusion that love and sex are paradoxically related is rather obvious. What is interesting is that any attempt to spell this idea out directly in prose completely destroys the effects of the poem. Why is this so?

The sexual and excretal anatomy of the human body is a profoundly taboo subject for most Western readers; this fact is represented in assumptions (19-21). Where Yeats' description allows most readers to consider this subject without too much discomfort, an attempt to express the same facts in a literal paraphrase will significantly increase such discomfort. The indirectness of Yeats' expression ("mansion", "Love", "place of excrement") permits the reader to consider the fundamental connection between "fair" and "foul" that human physiology itself manifests without feeling squeamish or suspecting vulgarism. This effect is something that the classical rhetorical tradition does not explain. In a relevance-theoretic framework, the vagueness can be seen as allowing Yeats to achieve precisely the range of effects he intends.

In pursuing this line of thought, we are seeing how Yeats might have intended the poem to be optimally relevant to us.[36] Not every reader will perceive the full range of

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[36] In more scholarly interpretations, we might extend the context by including information about Yeats' personal background as an Irish poet writing in the first quarter of this century. It would be possible to go still (continued...)

contrasts I have described; some may not even perceive any of them. Still, for most readers they will be salient enough to attract the attention, and to elicit some effort of interpretation using available contextual assumptions.

We know, then, that the poem makes certain assumptions manifest. However, this does not of itself entitle us to believe that the writer *intended* to make them manifest. What does entitle us to believe this is central to relevance theory. Relevance theory is ultimately a theory of cognition. It claims that human beings pay attention to what seems relevant to them: that is, what seems capable of producing enough contextual effects to repay the efforts expended. A communicator, in requesting the audience's attention, encourages him to assume that what he will be told is relevant enough to repay his effort and attention. The criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance helps him decide on the intended interpretation.

When we interpret an utterance, whether in spontaneous comprehension or in literary interpretation, we are thus entitled to assume that the writer meant to make her informative intention mutually manifest to herself and her intended audience. To the extent that the actual audience is distant from the original communicator in time or space, their cognitive environments are likely to differ, and the actual interpretation may differ from the intended one in ways the communicator may not have foreseen.[37]

We have seen that although a fairly determinate paraphrase of some texts is possible, such a paraphrase destroys the immediate poetic effect - the "magic" that student readers guard so jealously. Equally, a determinate paraphrase does not lead on to the wide-ranging assumptions of a sophisticated or literary interpretation. Thus any attempt to render literary

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(...continued)
further, to bring in historical information about late medieval images and poems on the same theme, and Yeats' play on the "danse macabre". Each such development represents an extension of the context, but one for which there is historical (rather than textual) evidence that it might well have formed part of the interpretation that Yeats envisaged - part of what he might have expected the poem to convey.

[37] One of the aims of historical scholarship is, of course, to make more accessible to present-day readers what assumptions the original communicator might have envisaged. Clearly, though, most present-day readers of *Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop* would have relatively easy access to assumptions about human anatomy, about puns, about Irish Catholic attitudes towards the connection between sex, sin and death, and about "wise fools" for Yeats' intention on these points to become mutually manifest. We may have less easy access to assumptions derivable from Yeats' other poems, though his intention on these points may still be quite strongly manifest. As regards interpretations based on his own psychological make-up and attitudes, we should not assume he intended to communicate them unless he had reason to think the facts about him would be manifest to his intended audience.

texts more "precise" can actually make the production of a literary interpretation impossible. I have also attempted to demonstrate that the interpretation of a poem need not itself be vague, and in fact, the assumptions making up even the brief interpretation of the Yeats poem are quite specific. Such an interpretation is not always possible, or intended, though.

8. Communication and poetic effects: Blake

In the case of the Yeats poem, despite the reliance on metaphor, personification, allusion and paradox, some sort of paraphrase can be given, though increasingly on the reader's responsibility, so that different readers may paraphrase it in slightly different ways. A theory of communication must show how these "literary" devices achieve their effects, and why these effects are generally damaged or weakened by any attempt at literal paraphrase. Blake's poem, *The Sick Rose*, raises just this issue - which a theory of communication has to deal with. Here the problem is that what is communicated may be something apparently non-propositional - for example, images, impressions, emotions.

It is notoriously difficult to construct literary interpretations of Blake's poetry. Few students of literature will venture far beyond the *Poems of Innocence and Experience*; most readers, indeed, will have no acquaintance with his works beyond a small handful of frequently-collected lyric poems, and, of course, *Jerusalem*. If we consider *The Sick Rose*, we find that, as Alice commented, "Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas - only I don't exactly know what they are!" The Yeats poem, for all its allusiveness and indeterminacy, points in a fairly definite direction. The peculiarity of that poem is that if the metaphors are paraphrased in literal form - as they can be - the poem loses its force. The oddness of the Blake poem is that no such restatement is really possible.

The situation described in *The Sick Rose* is completely fanciful: worms fly, a rose has a bed, the bed itself is "of crimson joy", and the worm's activity is said to be a "dark, secret love". None of these statements describes situations that correspond with our knowledge about roses and worms. The "howling storm" increases the sense of threat or anxiety, but does not seem to affect the "story" of the rose one way or another. To reach an interpretation of this poem is to rely more or less exclusively on impressions, images and emotions.

Unlike the Yeats poem, *The Sick Rose* is based on a "story" that is so vague, and still so at odds with our knowledge of the world, that it requires a great deal of effort to find even

the most rudimentary literal paraphrase. We could say that Blake is describing, in symbolic language, the attack on the rose by a worm. This is probably true, but unhelpful; the statement fails to express any of the "ideas" that the poem "fills our heads with". We can develop this initial paraphrase by saying that Blake uses symbolic language to describe the infestation of the rose to suggest the fact that all living beings will be food for worms; but this paraphrase removes the problem one degree. Instead of a vague and partial description of the immediate situation, we now have a vague and partial hint at one line of interpretation the situation can support.

The Blake poem presents a different challenge from the Yeats poem, which can be at least partly paraphrased without much difficulty. Feelings and visual images play a crucial role in the interpretation of *The Sick Rose*, as I want to show now by working through one possible reading of it. In discussing this poem, I have deliberately focused on quite small units (phrases, words) because the larger syntactic units are so obscure. The entire poem consists only of two sentences; the situation they describe is so fantastic that it is hard to describe clearly. I want to explore the emotions and impressions which seem so important to interpreting the poem.

The Sick Rose is highly evocative. The reader is impressed with the sense of threat, of imminent, inescapable, slow destruction. The word "rose" gives us ready access for little effort to many assumptions about the sensual beauties of the flower, and also - by telling us it is "sick" - assumptions about fragility (we could even entertain assumptions about the cultural connection in the West between flowers and illness). The mention of the "worm" may give us access to assumptions concerning both the facts about a destructive agricultural pest, and the fact that a dead body becomes infested with worms, which have as a result become a symbol of decay. The fact that the worm is "invisible" encourages the reader to develop lines of interpretation involving the idea that the threat which the worm presents cannot be guarded against; the implication of that assumption may well be impressions of anxiety and dread. Finally, the image of the "howling storm" the worm "flies" through can increase the reader's sense of apprehension and horror in a number of ways. We can think about the actual conditions of a storm, which a fragile plant cannot withstand; this can make us personally uncomfortable if we think of being caught out in such a storm. Besides this, the image of a worm flying through the air may strike some readers as grotesque. If we imagine this invisible threat being propelled towards the plant by a great force, we may

experience a sense of menace.

The second stanza develops these impressions further. The poet tells us that the worm has "found out" the rose; this lexical choice, combined with our encyclopedic knowledge about how worms move, may lead the reader to entertain assumptions about the worm's movement as a form of insinuation. The word "insinuation" can be used to describe the worm's way of moving, and an attitude, so that the descriptive and interpretive aspects of the poem are connected. This connection is reinforced by the phrase "thy bed of crimson joy". The dead metaphor "flower bed" doesn't usually produce the kind of rich effects we expect from poetry. This phrase ought to be easy to paraphrase literally. However, the bed is not this literal kind, but one of "crimson joy"; a reader may combine the impressions the phrase encourages him to develop by imagining a red rose that not only brings but also feels joy.

Finally, the worm's behaviour is described as "dark, secret love" which will "destroy" the life of the rose. Again, there is something strongly, but vaguely, repulsive in the intimacy of the description. The worm's burrowing into and consuming of the rose is of course physically intimate. Its horrid intimacy (either physical or emotional) completes the connection which the interpretation of the previous parts of the utterance have encouraged between love and death. The result is a series of images and impressions which are not amenable to literal paraphrase. In fact, we can more readily paraphrase the "meaning" of the poem in a series of questions, such as: if death and corruption constitute a kind of love, then what are we to make of the reverse formulation? is love, no matter how well-intentioned, a kind of death? does love always destroy the object of its passion?

What we find, actually, at the end of a close reading of *The Sick Rose* is that Blake has encouraged us to construct assumptions about a series of similarities - between the rose and beauty, the rose and love, the worm and death, the worm and love. These connections are expressed in terms, and in a situation, which are manifestly intended to produce anxiety, dread, discomfort and repulsion in the reader. The vagueness of this poem is therefore essential to its effects. It does not help to try, as students often do with Blake, to "reduce" it to a literal paraphrase. Such an attempt can diminish the effects of the poem while at the same time distorting it.

The Yeats and Blake poems thus provide evidence against the classical approach to rhetoric and poetics. Attempts to render them more explicit through paraphrase will show

why students who are learning to develop literary interpretations so often resist their instructors' attempts. Their intuition that paraphrase and close investigation (of this sort, anyway) will destroy or diminish the "magic" of the poems for them seems to be quite justified. Certainly, the rude paraphrase of *Crazy Jane Talks With the Bishop* and the prosaic restatement of *The Sick Rose* would seem to bear them out.

Yet we know that a literary interpretation, a close reading, of both poems can repay the reader with a greatly enriched and enhanced understanding. The challenge for teachers of literature is to show their students how to develop an interpretation that preserves the rich effects that may be achieved by the literary work without falling into the sort of generalities discussed earlier. The challenge for a theory of communication is to show how such effects can be explained.

9. Poetic effects in prose: Brontë's *Villette*

So far we have been considering poetic effects in poetry. But there is no reason why we should limit indeterminacy, vagueness, or poetic effects, to poetry. There is plenty of evidence in the literature that many critics and readers respond to language use in prose as they do in poetry. I shall now consider how vagueness might contribute to intended effects by looking at some examples from prose.

I have chosen examples from two novels: Dickens' *Little Dorrit* and Brontë's *Villette*. The two novels differ markedly in many ways, but are not intended to be representative of a particular range of writing; rather, I consider them to be representative of the kind of fiction most writers will read with pleasure, and from which literary interpretations are produced.

I want to begin with Brontë's work. *Villette*, the third and last of her novels to be published in her lifetime, is in some ways a reworking of Brontë's miserable and disturbing experiences at the school in Brussels where she was both pupil and teacher. The central character and first-person narrator, Lucy Snowe, is, like Austen's "Emma", a person whom her creator thought "nobody but myself will much like". The story is simple enough: an English woman, cast on her own resources, takes up a position as teacher in a school in "Labassecoeur" (a thinly-veiled fictionalisation of Belgium) where she suffers deeply; eventually she finds an outlet for her passionately emotional but repressed nature in returning the affection of a professor at the school, Paul Emanuel. To satisfy family obligations, he

sails to the West Indies (always a dangerous place in Brontë's fiction); before he goes, he sets Snowe up in her own modest school, which thrives while he is away. The famously "ambiguous" ending strongly suggests what only the wilfully obtuse cannot see: that Emanuel's ship founders on the return voyage, and Snowe is bereft again.

Almost all the action described above takes place in the last third of *Villette*; indeed, the absolute declaration of affection, the new school, the separation and bereavement all occur in the last two chapters (XLI and XLII). We may presume that this makes the last two chapters of the novel exciting and satisfying reading, but could wonder what on earth Brontë does with the preceding 595 pages. A good deal of it is taken up with the working out of ultimately disappointed emotional attachments; some with the settlement of Snowe into her ambiguous position in Madame Beck's conservatory. Most, however, is a transcription of Snowe's impressions: of others, herself, her dreary situation in life, her hopelessness about the future. We might expect then that much of the previous hundreds of pages consists of description and indirect or reported dialogue. And this is the case. What makes a significant amount of this description interesting is its determined vagueness (if I can put it that way): a vagueness bordering sometimes on obscurity. Some of the difficulty of these passages can be ascribed to Brontë's fondness for personification and allusion, particularly Biblical allusions presumably more readily accessible to her contemporaries than to modern readers.

Villette is littered with other passages which it is kind to call "vague". These may be descriptions of emotional states - which would be a kind of excuse - but the examples I have chosen are putative descriptions of events and people. This passage, for example, describes one of the major characters, an eighteen-year old girl, a close acquaintance of Snowe's when both were children. It is interesting, not only for itself, but for a pattern of failures of recognition that runs through the novel. We know that Snowe is at an intimate distance from this girl because of the emphasis on the facial features; yet neither of the characters, the story of whose childhood friendship actually opens the novel, recognises the other.

(49) "The brow was smooth and clear; the eyebrows were distinct but soft, and melting to a mere trace at the temples; the eyes were a rich gift of nature - fine and full, large, deep, seeming to hold dominion over the slighter subordinate features - capable, probably, of much significance at another hour and under other circumstances than the present, but now languid and suffering." (Brontë 1953, 1989: 346)

Now, many students faced with this passage will be misled by its apparent specificity and think of this as a fairly accurate description.[38] After all, are we not given details about the brow, eyebrows, eyes, and their expression? Yet we have no idea of Paulina's colouring, facial shape, eye colour, nor of any of the features - besides, significantly, the eyes - which we would normally expect in a detailed facial description. This is in fact the case for all the characters with the single exception of Paul Emanuel, who is described throughout ever more specifically. What, then, is the reader to do with this "description", that promises so much and yet is so abstract?

I would suggest that Brontë's vagueness here, as elsewhere, is intentional. The reader is encouraged to develop the interpretation of this passage along lines that exploit emotions to provoke images. Because for Brontë (and for Snowe, as several passages make clear) the physiognomy was almost a literal transcription of the soul, Paulina's features are important not for themselves but for what they reveal. Consequently, Brontë encourages the reader to develop for himself an image of a young woman whose face expresses such qualities. Depending on cultural or personal preferences, the image will almost certainly differ markedly from what Brontë envisioned, or among any large group of readers. But the vagueness here indicates that these differences are not significant, so long as, developing the lines of interpretation as Brontë has indicated ("smooth", "clear", "distinct", "melting", "soft", "rich", "fine", "full", "large", "deep", "languid", and "suffering") we arrive at the image of a face whose features express those qualities *for us*. We might note that later, using comparison, Snowe gives us a much clearer picture of this character, Paulina de Bassompierre, when she compares her to Sylvie, a "spanieless" kept in the school. Now that Paulina has played out her role in the action of the novel, she can be treated with less reverence.

(50) "[Sylvie] was very tiny, and had the prettiest little innocent face, the silkiest long ears, the

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[38] Though not every reader will be misled. Consider a passage from Trollope's *The Three Clerks*, in which two young ladies criticize a writer's vague description:

> "`Having thus described the Lady Crinoline -'
>
> "`You haven't described her at all,' said Linda; "you haven't got beyond her clothes yet.'
>
> "`There is nothing beyond them,' said Charley.
>
> "`You haven't even described her face,' said Katie; `you have only said that she had a turned-up nose.'
>
> "`There is nothing further that one can say about it,' said Charley." (Trollope 1857, 1989: 229)

This passage also makes clear that writers may know quite well that their descriptions are literally less than adequate, but that they communicate all that they feel the reader needs in order to recognise the intended interpretation.

finest dark eyes in the world. I never saw her but I thought of Paulina de Bassompierre: forgive the association, reader, it *would* occur." (Brontë 1853, 1989: 510)

(49-50) present us with precisely the sort of problem that a theory of communication must deal with. (49), though it expresses a series of determinate propositions, produces the effect of vagueness. On the other hand, (50), which is both metaphorical and fairly vague (we are directed to an "association" rather than to a description) would permit most readers to construct a pretty accurate picture of Paulina. In relevance-theoretic terms, we could say that the reader of (49), in his search for relevance, must construct an impression. Indeed, the lexical items I have picked out of (49) are as close as a writer can come to describing such impressions (rather than creating them). As each reader will have a different set of assumptions about what images satisfy his understanding of, say "melting" or "rich" eyes, he will necessarily construct an image that is more or less unique to him. Precisely because Brontë is interested in conveying impressions, the passage picks out the particular impressions she intends the reader to explore.

In (50), however, she is much more interested in communicating an image. Now, unlike the assumptions that would make up the impressions communicated by (49), which will inevitably differ from one reader to another, the image she has in mind in (50) is one she wants her readers to share. The particular image that Brontë uses as a basis for imagining Paulina's face is, moreover, quite limited in the range of implicatures it can yield: there are only so many assumptions a "spanieless" can lead us to. At least, there are only so many assumptions we can assume Brontë intended the term "spanieless" to make manifest.

(49-50), along with the examples I have discussed from various poems, have demonstrated how vagueness and indeterminacy can be used in particular passages or lines in a literary text. Vagueness may also be used as a strategy throughout a work. In that case, we can no longer say that the writer intends to produce a particular range of effects, or create a particular impression. When many passages of a work are marked by indeterminacy, as they are in *Villette*, it is legitimate to ask if the writer intended to communicate something beyond the effects each instance produces.

This question is one we should ask of *Villette*. To understand how a relevance-theoretic approach might deal with such strategies, we should look at the issues in the context of the novel as a whole. Now providing a general interpretation for a novel is a more complex proposition than for a lyric poem such as the Blake or Yeats examples I discussed.

However, since I am dealing with the literary interpretation not of phrases but of works, then such a context is unavoidable.

For a novel in which characters weep, frown, conspire and rage freely, *Villette* has a curiously smothered emotional atmosphere. This peculiarity is due entirely to the narrator, who attempts at all times to conceal the truth of her own emotions even from herself. A passage early in the novel, detailing the hardships which cast her on her own resources at the age of twenty-two, is typical:

(51) "[Having invited the reader to compare the passage of her teen years to the peaceful progress of a ship, Snowe suddenly changes tone:] ...in that case, I must somehow have fallen overboard, or ... there must have been a wreck at last. I too well remember a time - a long time - of cold, of danger, of contention. To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs. I even know that there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day." (Brontë 1853, 1989: 94)

We are never given any more details - if one can so call them - than these. Lucy Snowe, without family or friends, has a past as close as the grave. Unlike other orphans of literature (Dickens' "Pip" comes readily to mind), Snowe's search for a place in society is conducted by way of attempting to live emotionally and financially independent of it.

(52) "I had feelings; passive as I lived, little as I spoke, cold as I looked, when I thought of past days, I *could* feel. ... in catalepsy and a dead trance, I studiously held the quick of my nature." (Brontë 1853, 1989: 175)

What seems to make the novel so challenging is the combination of vagueness with the narrator's emotional repression. We must deal with a form of indirectness that affects the narrative. But we are intended to deal not only with the individual effects of individual utterances, but to go further and interpret the vagueness as resulting from the obliqueness which is Snowe's characteristic narrative strategy. On rare occasions only is Snowe permitted to convey in fairly literal terms her emotional state. Generally, we are given only *impressions* of emotion. These impressions themselves may be quite vivid, but they are nevertheless extremely difficult to pin down.

The emphasis on showing, rather than telling, on vagueness rather than literalness, persists throughout the novel. In it, Brontë conveys, rather than describes, the struggle of the will to subdue a nature that, though probably disposed to energy, has become unspeakably

oppressed by a long series of disappointments that have robbed the narrator of the ability to hope. Consequently, whenever the action requires Snowe to comment on or describe her own emotional condition, she can do so only by, so to speak, "glancing" at it. That is, she can bring herself to communicate her emotions only in vague terms that convey the intensity of the emotion without committing the speaker to actually admitting to it.

A bald description of Snowe's condition would produce different effects. For one thing, the reader would remain a spectator, an observer of Snowe's state. Brontë, however, seems to want the reader to undergo Snowe's experiences so as better to understand them: an interpretation supported by her use of first-person narrator.[39] *Villette* is in some respects the story of the survival of an extraordinarily sensitive soul, racked by self-consciousness, depressed into hopelessness, who finds herself in a world of active, noisy and relatively insensitive (but not blameable) people. Brontë does not seem to want to express these thoughts so much as she wants her reader to undergo the experiences (mentally, at least) that produce them.

For Snowe, every contact is a torment; but isolation, which is what the "hag" she calls "Reason" dictates is her lot, is far worse. She solves the intractable problem of sensitivity in an unsympathetic world by immobilizing her emotions, by embodying the assumptions about the connection between female virtue and weakness (all decent women in this novel tremble, lisp, and stammer), and by creating the persona Brontë probably set out to write in creating Snowe: a steely, icy creature, a "Snowe"-woman. On this interpretation of the novel, it should come as no surprise that the "descriptions" of those events, people and scenes that affect her emotionally - but which ultimately offer only disappointment - are indeterminate to the point of vagueness, and vague to the point of obscurity.

We can treat the vagueness of *Villette* in two ways. First of all, we can use the vague passages to construct an interpretation of what the writer intended to communicate. This is in fact what I have just done in my interpretation of these aspects of the novel. We can also treat them as evidence on which to base judgements about the novel, about its relation to Brontë's life, about its value as a literary work, and so on. In the first case, we are

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[39] Harriet Martineau destroyed her friendship with Brontë by a review in which she scolded the writer for her obsession with love; Brontë was offended both by the sentiment and by the accusation that this was in fact the subject of her novel. Brontë's reaction makes sense, since Snowe's life is an attempt to suppress emotion; but Martineau's intuition is also correct, since Snowe seeks oblivion primarily because the life of emotion, far from meaning nothing to her, means too much.

constructing a literary interpretation the responsibility for which is shared by writer and reader. In the second case, we are on our own; although Brontë may well have made all the evidence we shall use manifest, we are no longer entitled to assume that she *intended* to make it manifest. We are trying to catch her out, as it were, through an interpretation of covert or accidental information transmission.

We can add to our interpretation in a number of ways if we include assumptions not made manifest by the novel itself. We could say that the general vagueness of description in *Villette* (and in other of Brontë's novels) is the result of Brontë's own extreme short-sightedness (Gaskell's biography provides several telling incidents).[40] As well, her peculiar upbringing and the unrelieved tragedy of most of her life, as she saw the family who were her whole world taken from her by illness and dissipation, may be the reason that Snowe never alludes directly to any of her past life: it is Brontë's own. Brontë's experiences might also be responsible for Snowe's impression that life is a Slough of Despond in which the vast majority, the "maimed and mourning millions" will perish miserably. For Snowe's wretched self-consciousness we can substitute Brontë's; in the character's inability to speak among strangers, we trace the autograph of the writer. At what point, then, can we say that the vagueness and indeterminacy of the novel encourage such identification, or preclude it?

This leads us to a point that is generally evident to teachers of literature, but often obscure to students. It may be that the assumptions I've been discussing, about Lucy Snowe's emotional state and its connection to Brontë's personal history, are familiar to me from my reading, and so are highly accessible to me. Then my interpretation will doubtless be affected by these assumptions, which are both highly accessible, and in the general interpretation of the novel I have been forming, also highly relevant. The question will be whether Brontë also found this biographical information highly relevant, and whether she intended her reader

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[40] However, we would then have to account for the clarity and precision of descriptions such as this one: "[The parlour's] delicate walls were tinged like a blush; its floor was waxed, a square of brilliant carpet covered its centre; its small round table shone like the mirror over its hearth; there was a little couch, a little chiffoniere the half-open, crimson-silk door of which showed porcelain on the shelves; there was a French clock, a lamp; there were ornaments in biscuit china; the recess of the single ample window was filled with a green stand bearing three green flowerpots, each filled with a fine plant glowing in bloom; in one corner appeared a gueridon with a marble top, and upon it a work-box and a glass filled with violets in water." (Brontë 1853, 1989: 584)

to use it as part of the context for interpretation.[41] This point is taken up again in Chapter 4.

But there are other uses of vagueness and indeterminacy in prose, just as there are many ways a writer can exploit their effects in poetry. We have looked, in some detail, at how Brontë may have intended the reader to use the vagueness of her descriptions of people, places and events. In some cases, she may be encouraging her reader to develop interpretations involving impressions and emotions, as in the case of her description of the events of Lucy Snowe's early years. In others, she may be encouraging her reader to develop an image of a character which will express for that reader the qualities that Brontë wants to call attention to. These are not, however, the only ways in which vagueness and indeterminacy can produce effects in prose. Just as every utterance, though using a shared linguistic code, can be used to express a very wide range of implicatures, so too does each literary work communicate something extremely rich with a relatively small set of features.

Let us now turn to a case where fairly determinate utterances can lead the reader to develop a large set of weak implicatures. We will also consider how a series of such passages may lead the reader to the same general range of assumptions time and again. In such a case, the assumptions will be strengthened to the point where they are far more manifest than any alternative range of assumptions; furthermore, they deepen and enrich the passages' effect both individually and collectively. We'll pay particular attention to the use of metaphor in this case.

10. Poetic effects in prose: Dickens' *Little Dorrit*

Before we get into the specific passages in *Little Dorrit*, some introductory remarks are called for. Unlike "unsituated" utterances (as are often used in pragmatic discussions), the passages of a novel are intentionally and specifically contextualised. The contexts which we can relatively easily access are those I'll be summarising here (this will exclude, for example, contexts easily accessible to Dickens' contemporaries and fairly inaccessible to us

[41] The fact is that without the information we have about Brontë's life, some aspects of the generally accepted interpretations of this novel would not have arisen. But we cannot be sure that Brontë did not intend us to seek these out; the evidence is not convincing either way. We can only say that, with such weakly-implicated assumptions (both premises and conclusions), the onus of responsibility is increasingly on us as we make them more central to our interpretation.

as a result of changes in the world since that time, and assumptions about that world which his first readers would have held, and which we since have discounted).

Little Dorrit is one of Dickens' later works. I discuss this novel in more detail in my sections on repetition in Chapter 3, but for now a brief summary should suffice. The story of the novel is extremely complicated, but could be paraphrased as "A Tale of Two Prisons". The central characters, Amy ("Little Dorrit") and Arthur Clennam, are brought together initially by Little Dorrit's father's long imprisonment for debt in the Marshalsea prison. Little Dorrit supports her family by working as a seamstress for Clennam's mother, through whom she meets Arthur Clennam. Her father, William Dorrit, comes into a large inheritance and leaves the prison in body, though not in spirit. Bad investments with a swindler reduce the family fortune to nothing, but not before Dorrit dies in his daughter's arms, convinced he is back in the Marshalsea. Clennam, who has also been ruined by investments with the same swindler, is imprisoned for debt in the Marshalsea prison where he found Little Dorrit. Ultimately, all difficulties are resolved, all mysteries are clarified, and Clennam leaves the Marshalsea with the penniless Little Dorrit on his arm; their marriage reconciles the competing themes of the novel, and restores order.

Little Dorrit, like other Dickens novels, is swarming with characters. Dickens' ability to create memorable characters has been much commented on; his tendency toward caricature has drawn some criticism. We should look at the various ways Dickens describes his characters, briefly surveying a caricature (Jeremiah Flintwinch), semi-realised characters (Minnie Meagles and her maid, Tattycoram), and central characters (Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam). I want to examine Dickens' use of this range of determinacy, and see whether he exploits this aspect of communication as Brontë does, or rather differently.

The most compact description of Jeremiah Flintwinch is provided by Flora Finching:

(53) "...Flora's dashing into a rapid analysis of Mr Flintwinch's cravat, and describing him, without the lightest boundary line of separation between his identity and Mrs Clennam's, as a rusty screw in gaiters. Which compound of man and woman, no limbs, wheels, rusty screw, grimness, and gaiters, so completely stupefied Mr Dorrit, that he was a spectacle to be pitied." (Dickens 1857, 1982: 522. All references to *Little Dorrit* are from this edition and will be noted by page number only.)

We know just how he feels. Without the benefit of the many earlier descriptions the narrator provides, Flora's explanation would be quite opaque to the reader too. Let's look at some of

the introductory descriptions:

(54) "He was a short, bald old man, in a high-shouldered black coat and waistcoat, drab breeches and long drab gaiters. ... There was nothing about him in the way of decoration but a watch, which was lowered into the depths of its proper pocket by an old black ribbon, and had a tarnished copper key moored above it, to show where it was sunk. His head was awry, and he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, as if his foundations had yielded at about the same time as the house, and he ought to have been propped up in a similar manner." (26)

This physical description is augmented by a narrative of his mannerisms, which are usually significant in Dickens:

(55) "His neck was so twisted, that the knotted ends of his white cravat usually dangled under one ear; his natural acerbity and energy, always contending with a second nature of habitual repression, gave his features a swollen and suffused look; and altogether, he had a weird appearance of having hanged himself at one time or another, and of having gone about ever since halter and all, exactly as some timely hand had cut him down." (30)

Now, these lengthy passages are rummaged through from time to time, and the narrator uses the most salient aspects of Flintwinch's appearance and mannerisms to identify or characterise him:

(56) "...Jeremiah Flintwinch of the cut-down aspect..." (36)

(57) "...Mr Flintwinch of the wry aspect..." (151)

(58) "...[Flintwinch] said ... with his wryest twist upon him..." (292)

(59) "...Flintwinch, screwing himself rapidly in that direction." (297)

(60) "Jeremiah Flintwinch, who had been gradually screwing himself towards [Mrs Clennam] ... twitched his gaiters..." (650)

(61) "...an old man, who wore the tie of his neckcloth under one ear, and who was very well known to be an Englishman ... [called] Mynheer von Flyntevynge." (663)

Unlike the peculiarly vague descriptions given by Brontë in *Villette*, these passages go into some physical detail. In each one, however, there is a simile or metaphor which creates a whole open-ended impression that can not be paraphrased in terms of a determinate set of propositions. Such impressions are best analyzed as a set of weak implicatures.

Consider first Mrs Finching's hurried account of the old man. She has identified him by giving the most salient parts of his appearance: his rustiness, his gaiters, and his being, in some way, a "screw". Of these, only his gaiters could be considered a descriptive attribute. They are part of his habitual costume, and are characteristic through continual use. On the

other hand, the other aspects, his "rustiness" and his being a "screw" are metaphorical. Furthermore, they are elaborated through repetition so that no two descriptions actually repeat previous instances without some modification. As metaphors, each attribute encourages the reader to develop a line of interpretation that explores resemblances between rustiness or screws and an old man.

Now, we know that clothes which are ill-cared for develop a reddish sheen; so we can assume that Flintwinch, living as he does in the old house, uncared for and uncaring, has allowed his clothes to develop a rusty aspect. Dickens also encourages us to develop similarities between the old man and a tumbledown house, where we might expect a general flavour of dry rot and general decay. Although (54) and (55) are quite distinct metaphors, then, they nevertheless send the reader along similar lines of interpretation. The implicatures the reader would be entitled to recover might well include the similarities I have indicated above, but a host of other, related assumptions as well. We might think of the way in which aging and unkempt houses sag, and imagine that a man cut down at the point of death would also seem incapable of properly supporting the weight of his body; or that houses beginning to decay tend to slope sideways, or cave in, as would a man who had been hanged and rescued at the last moment; and that an old man whose clothes were ill-fitting, worn out, and perhaps askew could call to mind the appearance of a neglected house, both inside and out. We might develop a sense of wonder that such decrepitude had not already collapsed in on itself, as we would if faced with a house "propped up", or a man "cut-down"; and feel perhaps that there was something unsavoury and unhealthy, even unnatural, about such a person. All of these, of course, are very weak implicatures. In the context of the novel, in which these and a good many more descriptions of Flintwinch's appearance and behaviour are provided, the capsule representations of (55-60) function similarly to any reference that picks out the most salient features of an object.

The claim is that *any* creative metaphor communicates weak implicatures. But if we look again at (56-61), especially in the context of (54-55), we note that all of the metaphors point the reader in the same general direction. In fact, the more metaphors Dickens employs to communicate his intentions about Flintwinch, the more vivid our image of Flintwinch becomes. As I noted in the previous section, when we are sent to similar ranges of assumptions time and again, we are likely to narrow down the set we use. This is because some of these assumptions become increasingly strengthened by the frequency with which

they are accessed; the more easily accessed they are, the more manifest they are as well, and the more strongly they are communicated.

What I've done in (54-61) is show how all the metaphors point in the same direction, steer the reader's thoughts in the same way. They may still leave plenty for the individual to explore. Dickens' tendency to caricature, which is closely related to hyperbole, is therefore also analyzable in terms of weak implicatures. This use of a small set of strongly-marked traits to evoke a character is the essence of caricature. A complex individual is reduced to this small set of features; and so complete is this reduction that the writer can summon up everything the reader needs to know, with even a selection from this already small set. We can see why critics (and the victims of caricature) feel that the reliance on such methods is a failing. Although the assumptions provided are readily accessible, they do not, after the first few uses, provide any significant new contextual effects in themselves. The term "vague" is not particularly appropriate here, since the impression is quite vivid. Nevertheless, we can see how the writer has exploited vagueness or indeterminacy to communicate this intense impression.

In (53), Dickens uses Mrs Finching's tendency to jumble topics together for comic effect; the effect, we might note, would probably be lost if we were not in on the joke. Dickens, having prepared us with a good many similar descriptions through the narrator, presents an utterance that provides the reader with ready access to highly relevant assumptions about Flintwinch and Mrs Clennam. The effects of Flora's vagueness depend not only on our recognizing Dickens' intention to convey an impression of the old man; but also on our recognizing that the writer intends to put us in a position where we can make sense of these extravagantly vague descriptions and Dorrit cannot.

Between out-and-out caricatures and the "fully-realised" or complex characters there is a world of gradation. Somewhere along this spectrum in *Little Dorrit* we find Minnie Meagles ("Pet") and her maid Tattycoram. Both characters have roles of some significance in the novel; and their descriptions are related to those roles, and to the effect which Dickens appears to want to create using them. Pet, the pretty, sweet-natured but rather spoiled daughter of well-off parents, is the survivor of a twin. Tattycoram is a foundling, adopted by the Meagles from Coram's Foundling Hospital and given a perfectly good name - Harriet Coram - that is "sportively" reduced to her "jingling nickname". They are in a sense mirror images, for Pet may be what Tattycoram might have been: the parentless girl certainly feels

this is so, and deeply resents her position as maid. Their descriptions are interesting:

(62) "[Pet was a] fair girl with rich brown hair..." (13)

(63) "...her rich brown hair naturally clustering about her..." (280)

On the other hand, her maid is described as

(64) "...a handsome girl with lustrous dark hair and eyes..." (14)

(65) "Her rich black hair was all about her face..." (21)

(66) "...raising her lustrous black eyes...; Her rich colour..." (276)

(67) "...confusedly tumbling her bright black hair in the vehemence of the action..." (277)

(68) "...her rich black eye were fastened upon the man with a scrutinising expression..." (446)

The intriguing aspect of these excerpts is the frequent occurrence of "rich", "lustrous", and "bright". Although the last two are fairly specific, in the context of these passages they are not so much descriptive as suggestive. Both, of course, are related to light. In (64), (66), and (67), then, it ought to be possible to replace these words with "shiny", since that is a literal equivalent. Yet, if we do so, the effects (particularly in (66)) are either completely destroyed or quite changed. "Shiny black eyes", apart from the unfortunate access the phrase gives us to the assumption that Tattycoram has bruised her eyes in some fashion, may be shining with any number of emotions. "Lustrous", however, a vaguer term, allows the reader, very much as he did in *Villette*, to construct an image that satisfies his own ideas about attractive hair and eyes. As with the Brontë passages, we can assume that there will be a range of variation in the actual images which readers will entertain; but there is little doubt that by using these words Dickens suggests that Tattycoram is attractive - whatever that term may mean to any individual.

The same process is clearly at work in the use of the word "rich". This word is shared with the most important descriptions we get of Pet. Again, the vagueness of the word encourages the reader to develop his interpretation in terms of imagery, rather than thought; and again, the reader is invited to construct an image of an attractive girl of slightly different colouring than her maid.

Interestingly, unlike Flintwinch, Pet's initial description is not repeated throughout the novel as her most salient feature. Indeed, she is described increasingly in emotional terms ("sweet", "tender") and her physical aspects are quite submerged by the novel's end. Tattycoram's, however, are not; although she is described in more active terms, she is still seen "externally", rather than through an account of her emotional state. This distinction can

be accounted for in at least two ways.

First of all, in the early part of the novel Pet is the object of Arthur Clennam's love. It is a love she cannot return, and indeed, barely suspects. So long as she is single she is seen as the focus for potential romantic attachment. Consequently, she is described in terms appropriate to a love object. As soon as she marries Henry Gowan, references to her appearance, except in the most general and respectful terms, cease. Now, although the novel is told by an omniscient, absent, third-person narrator, Arthur Clennam is the controlling consciousness. And although the story is Little Dorrit's, the person for whom her story has the most significance is Clennam.[42] We would expect, then, that as long as he entertains a hope of winning Pet's hand - or at least of seeing her avoid marriage with Gowan - the narrator will provide descriptions appropriate to Clennam's view of her. Once that possibility is foreclosed, and Clennam relinquishes even the thought of marriage (as he does, explicitly, in Chapter XXVIII), then the narrator provides descriptions that will lead us to understand that this renunciation is sincere and real. In this way, we can see that Dickens' descriptions of Pet serve also to characterise Clennam.

Secondly, as Clennam is the controlling consciousness, the reader is intended to share, to a degree, Clennam's outlook and reactions. In Dickens' culture there were few attitudes as reviled in a man as desiring another man's wife or betrothed. It is therefore essential that the narrator entirely avoid any references to Pet that emphasise her desirability. Consequently, the word "rich", and other descriptions of her physical appearance, vanish. Tattycoram, on the other hand, while not an appropriate object for romantic desire, can be thought of as attractive to the eye, particularly when her appearance - dark, lustrous, rich - is associated with a "dark spirit" of perversity that eventually tears her away from the Meagles' home. There is a curious blindness in some of Dickens' descriptions of very young women such as Tattycoram, a blindness we might think of as similar to Carroll's. Nevertheless, there is not sufficient evidence in the few descriptions we have of Tattycoram to conclude that Dickens' description of the girl is intended to be in the least salacious.

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[42] Clennam's thoughts after he learns of Little Dorrit's love for him strengthen this interpretation:

> "Looking back upon his own poor story, she was its vanishing-point. Everything in its perspective led to her innocent figure. He had travelled thousands of miles towards it; previous unquiet hopes and doubts had worked themselves out before it; it was the centre of the interest of his life; it was the termination of everything that was good and pleasant in it; beyond there was nothing but mere waste, and darkened sky." (613)

Finally, I would like to turn to the descriptions of the central characters, Amy Dorrit and Arthur Clennam. Little Dorrit, the heroine of the story, is evidently of first importance to it. Yet we have a curiously impoverished portrait of her. She is mentioned twice in the novel (33, 40) before there is any description of her:

(70) "...her diminutive figure, small features, and slight spare dress, gave her the appearance of being much younger than she was. A woman, probably of not less than two and twenty, she might have been passed in the street for little more than half that age. Not that her face was very youthful, for in truth there was more consideration and care in it than naturally belonged to her utmost years; but she was so little and light, so noiseless and shy, and appeared so conscious of being out of place among the three hard elders, that she had all the manner and much of the appearance of a subdued child." (44-45)

(71) "It was not easy to make out Little Dorrit's face; she was so retiring ... and started away so scared if encountered on the stairs. But it seemed to be a pale transparent face, quick in expression, though not beautiful in feature, its soft hazel eyes excepted. A delicately bent head, a tiny form, a quick little pair of busy hands, and a shabby dress - it must needs have been very shabby to look at all so, being so neat - were Little Dorrit as she sat at work." (45)

Like Flintwinch's initial description, these passages (and a few, shorter ones) are dipped into constantly when Little Dorrit appears. But in these cases she is called "very, very little creature indeed" (57); she has a "little figure" (59), a "light step and little figure" (65), a "slight hand" (681), or a "delicate head, pale face" (69). She is a "delicate", "shy", "little", "small", "light", "slight", "shabby", "child" or "child-like" person, who "trembles" constantly and who always expresses grief by "clasping her hands" - usually over her head.

Clennam is given even shorter shrift. He is a "grave dark man of forty" (14) with a "grave smile" (17) and a "visitor's brown face" (91) - and this seems to constitute the bulk of our information about his external appearances. There are, however, frequent excursions into his thoughts, of which this is an early example:

(72) "[Clennam] leaned upon the sill of the long low window, and looking out upon the blackened forest of chimneys again, began to dream. For, it had been the uniform tendency of this man's life - so much was wanting in it to think about, so much that might have been better directed and happier to speculate upon - to make him a dreamer, after all." (33)

We can see that Little Dorrit is described in terms that strongly encourage the reader to develop his own image of a small, slight child-woman who embodies the virtues of mid-nineteenth-century English womanhood. We note that the vagueness of the description of

her face ("pale", "transparent", "quick", "soft") is relieved by one specific ("hazel eyes") and an instance of litotes ("not beautiful"). Litotes, on the other hand, normally produces vague or indeterminate descriptions anyway (as in, for example, Melville's extended use of this device in *The Confidence-Man*). Dickens, like Brontë, encourages us to develop an interpretation based on our own assumptions about small, delicate child-women.

What, however, are we to make of the extremely cursory description of the central character? Arthur Clennam is a cypher: and although his inner life is described in great detail throughout the novel, we learn almost nothing more about his appearance. Such information as we do have is contained in the words "grave" and "dreamer". Such a description surely is far too vague to support a central character over seventy chapters and twenty numbers.

Recall, though, that Clennam is not just the central character: he is also the controlling consciousness. Then the writer may well intend an extremely vague physical description so as to allow the largest number of readers to enter into Clennam's consciousness with minimal difficulty. In this aspect, *Little Dorrit* parallels *Villette*: both writers take the reader within the central character so that he may experience, to some degree, the character's mental state. Unlike Lucy Snowe, whose mental condition is peculiar, Clennam's is much more common; and so his inner life, though detailed, is not presented in the intensely emotional terms that Snowe's is. Consequently, although both writers may have similar motivations for their use of vague descriptions - to encourage the reader to develop an interpretation that will help him share the character's mental state - their effects are quite different.

11. Conclusion

The challenge in discussing works of either poetry or prose in this fashion is to avoid draining all the interest out of the passages while demonstrating how they might achieve their effects. I have attempted to show that indeterminacy and vagueness in both prose and poetry, rather than posing insuperable problems for a theory of communication, can be accommodated, and made the basis of explanatory interpretations within relevance theory. This area is the most contentious in literary interpretation, because it also marks the dividing line between what is a legitimate interpretation, and what unlicensed speculation. The crucial difference is between what *becomes* manifest to the reader, and what is *intentionally made manifest* - and the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance is supposed to shed

light on how the writer's intentions are recognised. Relevance theory also claims that intentional communication shades off into speculation.

Students find the borderline between interpretation and speculation difficult to sense, as my examples have shown. Their intuition that they have been led to their speculative conclusions by the writer are based on their experiences with the process of interpretation, both spontaneous and taught. Some of their confusion is based on their failure to recognise the distinction between making manifest and intending to make manifest. Rather than trying (vainly, I would claim) to draw their attention to specific "markers" in the text which will help students distinguish between legitimate interpretation and speculation (that is, between shared and sole responsibility in reaching interpretations), teachers could encourage students to examine what can be considered definitely intended, what definitely unintended, and what falls somewhere in between. By emphasising the process of interpretation, and applying the simple ideas underlying relevance theory, teachers of literature could themselves draw principled distinctions that would benefit their students, and use them in exploring the complex reality.

The main points remain, no matter where we draw the line. If we consider literary works to be communicative acts, then we might decide what counts as communication, and what sorts of things can be communicated. Furthermore, if we admit that vague or indeterminate communication exists, then we need to account for its effects, and the fact that these effects are often destroyed by a literal paraphrase. Finally, we need to determine whether the literary use of vagueness and indeterminacy - what I am calling poetic effects - is limited to poetry or extends to prose works as well. This is important because traditionally poetic utterances have been characterised as deviations from a norm of literal truthfulness. On that assumption, poetry has been seen as intrinsically different from prose, which is judged by its content (its "realism") rather than by its devices. In fact, prose that incorporates many of the devices of poetry is classed distinctly from "ordinary" prose: "prose-poem", "experimental", "poetic" and so forth.

I have so far, then, briefly described relevance theory and discussed its treatment of vagueness and indeterminacy in both poetry and prose. However, there are other questions which these sections have raised. What light does relevance theory shed on the notion of foregrounding? Can relevance theory account for the wide variation in interpretations among professional readers (who can be assumed to share cognitive environments to a much greater

degree than can fledgling students)? Can relevance theory shed light on what constitutes a literary work, and a literary interpretation? These are the questions I now turn to.

Chapter Three:
Foregrounding and figurative language

> Lorsque j'avais six ans j'ai vu, une fois, une magnifique image, dans un livre sur la Forêt Vierge qui s'appellait "Histoire Vécues." Ça représentait un serpent boa qui availait un fauve.
> ... J'ai alors beaucoup réfléchi sur les aventures de la jungle, et, à mon tour, j'ai réussi, avec un crayon de couleur, à tracer mon premier dessin.
> ...J'ai montré mon chef-d'oeuvre aux grandes personnes et je leur ai demandé si mon dessin leur faisait peur.
> Elles m'ont répondu: "Pourquoi un chapeau ferait-il peur?"
> Mon dessin ne représentait pas un chapeau. Il représentait un serpent boa qui digérait un éléphant. J'ai alors dessiné l'intérieur du serpent boa, afin que les grandes personnes puissent comprendre. Antoine de Saint Exupéry, *Le Petit Prince* (1971: 3-4)

1. Foregrounding: introductory remarks

Foregrounding, like literary interpretation, is a term much used and not well understood. Most critics who use or hear the term are quite sure they know what it means, yet definitions vary significantly. Both the importance of the term to many areas of literary studies, and the degree to which it is accepted by otherwise opposing schools of thought, indicate that some examination of this notion is crucial - and overdue. Freeman says that the "concept of foregrounding has been central to much recent work in stylistics" (Freeman 1970: 40). In the same volume, Leech asserts that "[f]oregrounding ... has been claimed to be a basic principle of aesthetic communication" and therefore "valuable, if not essential, for the study of poetic language" (in Freeman 1970: 121-122).

Let's begin with some discussion of this important notion. Foregrounding grew out of attempts to use the results and methods of linguistic research in understanding the differences between literary and non-literary texts. Leech summarises the central points of this connection between foregrounding and "literary language" through a series of definitions. For him, "literature is the creative use of language: and this, in the context of general linguistic description, can be equated with the unorthodox or deviant forms of language" (Leech 1966: 136). Therefore, he goes on, "[l]iterature is distinguished from other varieties of linguistic activity above all by the number and the importance of the deviant features it contains" (Leech 1966: 140). In this context, he concludes, the term "*aktualisace*, translated ... as `foregrounding', was used by the pre-war Prague school of linguistics in a sense roughly

corresponding to my `unique deviation'" (Leech 1966: 144). Thus foregrounding is bound up with the notion of "deviations" in texts. Wetherill notes that consequently, "it is difficult for the critic to be as squeamish about the idea of deviation as some linguists are. The fact is rather that everything may be looked at in terms of it" (Wetherill 1974: 101). Despite the ubiquity and centrality of foregrounding, few solid results have emerged from research in this area. Even the basic aspects of a programme of investigating foregrounding have not really been followed through.

Probably the most thorough study of foregrounding is van Peer's (1986). He reviews the history of the term, provides a description, and reports on the statistical analysis of the results of several experiments designed to test the presence and effects of foregrounding in poetry. The responses of his readers (which he summarises and analyses in Chapter Four) are not discussed for their content, but rather for characteristic or important consistencies.[43] Nevertheless, van Peer's work does not advance our understanding of foregrounding, though he points out central weaknesses in previous discussions, and draws out some interesting implications of his results. I want to look at the general failure of this programme.

Part of the problem, of course, is the difficulty of defining foregrounding. In the introduction to their summary of the history and development of the term, Miall and Kuiken propose to examine "the *effects* of literary style, known as foregrounding" (Miall and Kuiken 1994: 389; italics added); yet they tell us that Mukarovsky's original term, *aktualisace*, referred "to the *range* of *stylistic variations* that occur in literature" (Miall and Kuiken 1994: 390; italics added). Van Peer tells us that the term "is to be understood as a pragmatic concept, referring to the dynamic interaction between author, (literary) text and reader. ...The concept itself derives from an analogy with a fundamental characteristic of human perception, ie the necessity to distinguish, in the act of perceiving, a figure against a ground ..." (van Peer 1986: 20-21). This definition reminds us forcibly that the term is metaphorical, something Leech makes explicit: "The metaphorical term `foreground' suggests the figure/ground opposition of gestalt psychology: the patterns of normal language are relevant to literary art only in providing a `background' for the structured deployment of deviations from the norm." He goes on to add that "if the gestalt metaphor is retained, the word `figures' of `figures of

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[43] Van Peer's discussion thus complements Richards' methods and results in *Practical Criticism* (1929): where Richards provided selected responses as illustrations within the framework of his arguments, van Peer offers arguments derived from mathematical descriptions of the body of responses.

speech' is reanimated by a technical pun" (Leech 1966: 144-145).

Leech and van Peer demonstrate the problems of defining foregrounding and have to resort to vague terms ("dynamic interaction") or metaphorical comparisons (figure/ground opposition of gestalt psychology). There is another difficulty, though: there is a similar term in linguistics.[44] The senses of these two terms, though distinct, are very close, and some writers confuse them. Kinney's examination of foregrounding in *Beowulf* shows just how closely these two senses of foregrounding (literary and linguistic) can resemble one another: "The poem repeatedly - if temporarily - brings to the foreground a different narrative mode or focus or point of view, and whatever *is* foregrounded achieves, however briefly, a kind of dynamic autonomy" (Kinney 1985: 298). Her discussion, which contrasts the newly-presented mode with those that have already occurred in the text, makes clear that the distinction between new information, and foregrounded (or deviant) elements, is very fuzzy indeed. Since, as Givón points out, foregrounding (in either sense) is based on an opposition, critics often extend the notion to any contrast among elements of a text.

Finally, few writers distinguish between the fact and the effects of foregrounding. As van Peer puts it:

> A more serious problem relates to what exactly the concept ... stands for. ...A term such as "making strange" or "defamiliarization", for instance, may refer to two things. On the one hand it is meant to describe properties of the actual text, ie the literary devices that can be located in the text itself. On the other hand it points to the effect such devices may have on a reader. (van Peer 1986: 3)

The failure to distinguish between these two aspects of foregrounding has meant that, while the term continues to be widely used, there is neither critical consensus on its meaning, nor restraint in its application. "Foregrounding" can describe, and is used to describe, any contrasting or "striking" features of a text.

Criticism of the notion has failed to clear up these fundamental problems. Robey comments that "there seems...to be no objective way of determining what limits can be imposed on the description of the text's structure" in terms of foregrounding (which is how the Prague linguists had extended the original Formalist notion); "[a]n element of focus is

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[44] An example of the sense used by linguists can be found in Givón, who contrasts "presupposed, shared, old information or background" with "asserted, new information or foreground" (in Tomlin 1987: 175); critical of this binary opposition, he argues instead that we should "`eventually trade it in for more elaborate, more specific, less circular and empirically better grounded notions'" (Givón 1987: 185).

provided ... by the concept of the dominant, in the sense of the level of the text showing the highest degree of deformation". But, he goes on to point out, "even if the dominant is taken as the starting-point, a description of the relationships of all the components of a text would be potentially endless. Some further criterion is needed", but this criterion inevitably turns out to be the "analyst's own preconceptions ... as to what is important or interesting about the text he is dealing with" (Robey in Jefferson and Robey 1982: 47). His remarks point to what I will argue is the heart of the failure of the notion of foregrounding - the refusal to consider the writer's intention - but he does not pursue them, as he is interested in presenting an overview of critical theory rather than a detailed criticism of any one in particular. Certainly, I have seen few responses to his critical remarks in work dealing with foregrounding, and little awareness of the problems in critical works that use the notion.

If we see the attractions and the difficulties of the notion of foregrounding, we can understand how this situation has arisen. The term "foregrounding" may have been coined in this century, but the concept goes back at least to Aristotle: "Among the most effective means of achieving both clarity of diction and a certain dignity is the use of expanded, abbreviated, and altered forms of words; the unfamiliarity due to this deviation from normal usages will raise the diction above the commonplace, while the retention of some part of the normal forms will make for clarity" (Dorsch 1965: 63). Part of the programme of the Formalists, and later, literary theorists, has been to set this ancient intuition about literary texts and their effects on some sort of objective basis. Robey comments:

> The constant impression given by the Prague School is that the sort of description and analysis they call for is essentially objective and scientific in character, but in practice it seems impossible to exclude a strong element of subjectivity from this kind of ... study.
> (Robey in Jefferson and Robey 1982: 47)

I will argue in the following pages that the notion of foregrounding, while intuitively acceptable, is theoretically incoherent. Furthermore, I want to emphasise the distinction between what foregrounding is, and how it achieves its effects, for one thing that all critics agree on is that the purpose of foregrounding is to "disrupt ... everyday communication" for the purpose of creating "a special perception of the object", and thus "achieve defamiliarization" (Miall and Kuiken 1994: 390-391). Although one way to examine this process is to focus on "style" (hence the importance foregrounding has continued to have in stylistics), another is to look at the connection between language and interpretation. So, Leech (in

Freeman 1970: 119-128), speaks of foregrounding as a "basic principle of aesthetic *communication*" (italics added). A relevance-theoretic approach will explore just such a connection. Let's see if relevance theory can shed light on the notion of foregrounding, or at least explain why it has proved both so useful and so elusive.

2. Foregrounding: salience and intention

If we look at the literature on foregrounding, what seems common is the intuition that foregrounded elements are "striking". Such elements "stand out" somehow, call attention to themselves, "deviate" from or "deform" the linguistic structures we might expect or would consider correct or normal. Leech's description is both well known and pretty representative. He describes foregrounding (1969: 57) in two related ways:

(1a) Foregrounding is based on or achieved by "deviations from linguistic or other socially accepted norms".

(1b) "The foregrounded figure is the linguistic deviation ... [from] rules of English language, ... [or from] the English of poetry [which] has its own set of norms".

From these he derives descriptions of figures of speech and figures of thought:

(2a) Scheme: foregrounded repetition of expression

(2b) Trope: foregrounded irregularity of content

We ought to notice, before we go on, that at no point does Leech mention the intended effects that foregrounding is supposed to create; still, these formulations do capture many readers' and critics' intuitions about whatever it is in a text that affects them. Even more, it captures some of their intuitions about what distinguishes literary from non-literary texts. That is, those elements which mark a text as literary, or which produce effects, are, by virtue of being foregrounded, "striking", "memorable", "deviant". They "stand out" in some way.

But these are impressions, not descriptions. They attempt to account for effects after the fact; and as I will argue, they do not and cannot pick out such elements before interpretation is under way. Only when a reader is engaged in the process of interpretation can he begin to make judgements about what is foregrounded and what is not.

Notice that this makes all the attempted descriptions of foregrounding futile. The best anyone can say about foregrounded elements is that they differ somehow from other uses of

language. Van Peer identifies three types of such difference: internal, when an element differs from the surrounding text; external, when it differs from other texts; and statistical, when it differs from a given context. Put like this, we can begin to see how hopeless the attempt to define foregrounding must be. Consider that metaphor has been defined as involving a relationship of resemblance between any two objects; and that metonymy has been defined as involving a relationship of contiguity between any two objects. It's clear that these definitions are far too inclusive, as anything can be said to resemble anything else; and any two objects may be contiguous. Similarly, any part of a text can be said to differ from any other part of that (or another) text at a given time. This universally inclusive description is unable to pin down why some difference (or deviation, or strikingness) is significant in the first place; worse, it cannot exclude those differences which are not significant at all, as they produce no effects.

Nevertheless, we know that there are elements of a text that "stand out" for various reasons. In demanding attention, they require more processing effort than other parts of the text (or other texts); this must be justified by the creation of additional effects. In relevance-theoretic terms, then, these elements must be intended to reward "extra" effort with "extra" contextual effects. I want to show that a more profitable way to pursue the intuitions that underlie the notion of foregrounding might be to look at these effects, and the means used to achieve them. The best way to do that will be to look briefly at a few typical examples of foregrounding.

Leech's illustrative example (Leech 1969: 58) of foregrounding is taken from the monologue inserted into Eliot's *The Waste Land*:

(3) When Lil's husband got demobbed, I said -
I didn't mince my words, I said to her myself...
Now Albert's coming back, make yourself a bit smart.
He'll want to know what you done with that money he gave you
To get yourself some teeth. He did, I was there...

Leech makes the point that this passage is foregrounded not because of any intrinsic characteristics, but because Eliot has transposed "pieces of ordinary, non-poetic language into a poetic context". If the same utterances had been overheard in a pub or on a bus, he says, there would not have been any foregrounding (Leech 1969: 58). This kind of incongruity, he notes, is the source of one kind of foregrounding effect; but as we have seen, foreground-

ing is not as simple as mere incongruity. Consider this caption for a Canadian Heart and Stroke Foundation advertisement:

(4) He's got a pacemaker. She's got a grandfather.

It would be easy enough to describe the effects of the foregrounded elements in (4) in terms of the relationships implied between the referents of "he" and "she", and between his having a pacemaker and her having a grandfather. We could reword (4) to make some of this more explicit:

(5) Because he's got a pacemaker, she's got a grandfather.

And we could go on to, spell out the implications of (4) in more detail, which, while destroying the effect of (3) along the lines I have described in the previous chapter, would nevertheless be fairly accurate. What no current account of foregrounding can explain, however, is why (6) produces none of the same effects:

(6) She's got a grandfather. He's got a pacemaker.

Until we can distinguish between what *is* foregrounded, and what *follows from* foregrounding, then we cannot adequately account for the striking differences between (4) and (6).

To return to (1-2), notice that, although Leech does not mention the effects foregrounding is intended to produce, he tacitly distinguishes between the *fact* that something is foregrounded and the *effect* that this foregrounding is supposed to achieve. This leads us to the crucial question, which is not, as Leech and others believe, about what it is that makes us notice one piece of language. The more important question for a theory of interpretation is about what effects the author intends to achieve *as a result* of making us notice it, and about how they are achieved. This is true of both figures of speech and figures of thought, and of problem cases such as (4) and (6).

Let's consider a few more cases, beginning with examples of figures of speech involving repetition or parallelism:

(7) To err is human, to forgive, divine. (Leech 1969: 67)

(8) "If you prick us, do we not bleed? if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?" (Leech 1969: 68)

(9) My prime of life is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,

And all my good is but vain hope of gain;
The day is past, and yet I say no sun,
And now I live, and now my day is done. (from Tichborne's *Elegy*)

(10) "All you can talk about is pig, pig, pig." (Persson 1974: 47)

(11) With ruin upon ruin, rout upon rout,
Confusion worse confounded. (Leech 1969: 82)

I will be discussing repetition and parallelism in more detail in a later section, and so I am not particularly concerned to make distinctions among them at this point. However, (7-10) are all examples of schemes - "foregrounded repetitions of expression", as Leech calls them. We ought also to have some examples of tropes:

(12) Or where the kneeling hamlet drains
The chalice of the grapes of God. (Leech 1969: 149)

(13) The City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning... (Leech 1969: 157)

(14) When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide... (Milton, On His Blindness)

In all of (7-14) some element is foregrounded. In (7) we find a sequence of grammatical units repeated with contrastive effect. There is a similar kind of repetition in (8), but here there are four repetitions; initial contrasts ("bleed", "laugh") are set in more complex relationship with verbs of escalating seriousness ("die", "revenge"). Tichborne's *Elegy* (9) combines the use of contrasting elements in each line ("prime of life", "dish of pain"; "field of wheat", "crop of tares") with a complex relationship set up within each stanza, and proceeding from one stanza to the next. (10) is a case of straightforward formal repetition, but its effect cannot be classified as contrastive or intensive. In (11), a single item ("rout", "ruin") is repeated for intensive effect.[45]

The tropes, which Leech sees as involving foregrounding of content, are more difficult to describe; still, we can pick out what most readers would pinpoint as the "odd" elements. Leech calls (12) a case of sophisticated metonymy, but it could as easily be called

[45] Leech contrasts this example with one taken from Hamlet where the order of the repeated items is inverted:
What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba
That he should weep for her? (Hamlet [II.ii]; Leech 82)
The reversed order may produce different effects. We'll consider the question of effects in a later section.

a metaphor. The sentence resembles Blake's poem in that it presents the reader with an initially anomalous utterance which requires extensive development before it can be understood at all. In (13), the use of personification combined with simile foregrounds the anomaly of asserting that a section of London wears an aspect of the morning as a "garment". Milton's reference to his blindness ("my light is spent") is foregrounded in (14), not because it is anomalous, but because it is indirect: the reader has to work out what it refers to before he can understand the implications of the utterance.

Our intuitions about what is foregrounded in each case may be hard to express clearly. This raises several questions. If we cannot describe the marked element, then how can we explain it? If a reader is not consciously aware of the foregrounding, then can the writer achieve her intended effects? If the reader must expend extra effort to notice and reflect on the foregrounding, then should he expect effects different from those achieved by "unnoticed" foregrounding (eg, repetition that is not highly salient, metaphors that are barely noticeable, and so on)? All these are serious questions not dealt with at any length in the literature on foregrounding.

What we can say about each of the examples above is that we know they involve "foregrounding" *because* they have effects. In other words, if an element requires "extra" processing effort and produces "extra" effects, we have the intuition that it is foregrounded. . This is both obvious (after all, paying special attention to an element is bound to involve some extra expenditure of effort, and is likely to lead to increased effects) and helpful. Reworking the idea of foregrounding in this way allows us to see why some things that are formally similar to typical cases of foregrounding aren't (such as the repetition of prepositions in any stretch of prose) don't have significant effects, and hence aren't genuine cases; and why some elements that are not formally similar to other cases of foregrounding (such as the passage from dos Passos below) have significant effects, and hence are genuine cases.

(15) Thomas A Edison at eightytwo worked sixteen hours a day;

he never worried about mathematics or the social system or generalized philosophical concepts;

in collaboration with Henry Ford and Harvey Firestone who never worried about mathematics or the social system or generalized philosophical concepts;

he worked sixteen hours a day trying to find a substitute for rubber; whenever he read about anything he tried it out; whenever he got a hunch about something he went to the laboratory and tried it out. (1969: 311)

Now, we would not normally expect (15) to be "foregrounded". After all, the style resembles ordinary American speech patterns (lexicon, rhythm, syntax); and although (15) is physically set apart from the surrounding text (as (3) is not), within the passage itself there is little (except the typesetting) that ought to draw our attention to it; neither does it differ markedly in general style or content from other passages in the novel. Yet it is a clearly rhetorical passage; furthermore, many readers of dos Passos' works find this and similar passages among his most striking and forceful. Indeed, a similar passage from *Nineteen Nineteen* has been anthologised ("The House of Morgan").

We also have to account for borderline cases; those elements which may produce extra effects, but which we cannot be sure were intended to. Such "accidental" foregrounding is not uncommon. Consider Feidler's 1949 article in which he identified homosexual miscegenation as an enduring theme in American fiction. Feidler himself made no claim that this was intentional; he merely identified what were clearly common and striking elements in a variety of well-known American coming-of-age novels. The question of foregrounding therefore broadens: not only do we need to know how our attention is drawn to an element in the text; we need to be able to determine whether or not we are *supposed* to pay attention to this element.

The notion of foregrounding, as it is standardly accepted and described, does not provide an adequate answer to either of these questions. Indeed, I would argue that it continues to block both a clear perception of the real questions of literary interpretation, and an understanding of how we should proceed to answer these questions. For that reason, I do not intend to develop the term as a theoretical concept, though I will continue to use it informally to describe certain intuitions which themselves need to be explained.

, An element which we intuitively feel is "foregrounded" is one that is *salient*. The more salient an element, the more likely we are to pay attention to it, to spend effort on it; and in turn, the more likely we are to find, or expect to find, extra effect (see Chapter 2, especially sections 5 and 6). These effects are produced in the search for relevance. Either the salience is accidental, and we look for effects in order to justify our own expenditure of effort; or it is intended by the writer, and we look for effects in order to justify our expectation of optimal relevance. How do we decide whether the salience of a given element is accidental or intended? Sometimes it is so obvious that it *could not* be accidental; sometimes it is judged to be intentional because it gives rise to effects which are needed to

justify our expectation of relevance. In this aspect of interpretation, as in any other, all we can do is make a hypothesis which best explains the available evidence. In what follows, I shall use the term "foregrounding" to refer to intentionally salient elements of a text. The crucial aspects of the notion we have been used to call "foregrounding", then, are not deviation from, and contrast with, ordinary language or other texts; the crucial elements are *salience* and *intentionality*. An element is salient if it demands attention in its own right, or if it yields striking effects. This process is constrained, as ever, by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance, which provides us with a way of incorporating intention into interpretation.

If this is so, then we might expect that all "foregrounded" elements must be noticed consciously, and intended to be noticed consciously. One might then argue that intentionally salient passages (or elements) must be the hallmark of literary texts. Only a literary text, it might be thought, can knowingly demand that type of conscious effort from the reader. I would argue that, on the contrary, intentionally salient elements ("foregrounding") are not confined to the literary text; but that conscious reflection on such elements, and on the interpretive process they give rise to, is one of the hallmarks of the literary *interpretation*. I want now to consider the differences between spontaneous and literary interpretation, and to argue that it is not the mere presence of "foregrounding" that marks the literary text; and furthermore, that literary texts do not automatically produce literary interpretations.

3. Natural and literary processing

Let me recall the problems which the notion of "foregrounding" presents for a theory of literary interpretation. The central difficulty is that "foregrounding" is supposed to lead to effects, but how these effects are created is not explained. Furthermore, "foregrounding" is generally seen as connected, explicitly or implicitly, with literary texts or interpretations; usually, the effects are assumed to result from the conscious grappling with a difficulty in a text. I have argued that an element which we might intuitively recognise as "foregrounded" is one that automatically calls for extra processing effort, with the guarantee of a compensating richness of interpretation. The element that demands this extra effort may be a salient ambiguity, or repetition, or a semantic anomaly, and so on. We can demonstrate that such elements are also found in non-literary texts (conversations, popular entertainment, advertise-

ments and so on). Although a case such as (9) or (12) is not very likely to crop up in such contexts, the strategies they exemplify are universal. It was the recognition of this universality that led the Prague School critics and others to shift their attention to the degree to which "foregrounding" in a text calls attention to its own use as a way of distinguishing literary from non-literary texts.[46] Even here, critics found ultimately that every strategy used by literary writers has a corresponding use in clearly non-literary texts. I shall argue in the next chapter that the distinction between literary and non-literary texts lies not in the strategies used, but in the kind of interpretation they support; but for now I want to return to the issues raised by my criticism of the notion of "foregrounding".

Within the framework of relevance theory, any intentionally salient element automatically demands extra processing effort and promises extra effects. The reader must recognise the salient element *as* salient and consciously decide to extend his interpretive efforts. If that is the case, then what we call "foregrounding" might be seen as essentially literary. Whether its use was confined to literary texts would then be a matter for further discussion. We could argue that its use in non-literary texts might be an attempt to affect the reader's judgement of the text by implying a claim to authority, or seriousness, or innate quality, or what have you. The *misuse* of "foregrounding" might account for cliché, dead metaphor, empty rhetoric and so forth. Alternatively, we could attempt to extend the domain of literature to cover any text in which "foregrounded" elements occur; or at least, we could define such *elements* as literary, regardless of their use or context.

Neither of these arguments will hold up in the relevance-theoretic framework I have been developing. A communicator may encourage her hearer (or reader) to extend his processing efforts without necessarily intending that he recognise this encouragement as such. As relevance theory claims, the interpretive process is driven by an automatic search for an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance; but it does not follow that the reader or hearer must be consciously aware of every aspect of that process in order for communication to succeed. Indeed, if relevance theory is correct, we would not expect this to be the usual case in spontaneous comprehension. The search for relevance, a global, automatic cognitive process, must be constantly at work; according to relevance theory,

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[46] See Steiner (1982) for a selection of and commentary on the characteristic ideas of the Prague School. Fokkema and Ibsch (1978) also provide a balanced overview.

communication is a special application of this process, constrained by the principle of relevance - which is itself automatically communicated by each act of communication.

Consequently, a strategy which we identify as "foregrounding" in literary texts might well engage the reader or hearer in spontaneous comprehension; in that case, the reader or hearer will expend extra effort in an attempt to recognise the intended interpretation. If he should become aware of the "extra" demands being made on him, this will merely make available the assumption that the communicator intended him to pursue this line of interpretation. Failure to become aware of the extra demands merely means that this assumption will not be added to the context in which he is processing the text. This may in turn mean that he is less motivated to continue the search for relevance; he may be more likely to dismiss the "foregrounded" elements as "irrelevant" or may assign a low value to the text (calling it difficult or inaccessible, for example). It does not mean, however, that the "foregrounded" elements will not produce effects *unless* the reader or hearer becomes aware that they make these extra demands. Relevance theory makes no such prediction.

Still, we may argue that there are occasions on which the reader must become aware of the "foregrounding" in order to recognise at least part of the intended interpretation. This is most frequently the case in literary texts. It is not, however, the case for every interpretation of a literary text. Only those interpretations we call "literary" crucially depend on the reader's consciously recognising "foregrounded" elements and consciously accounting for them in terms of additional effects. Since there is then no clear division between literary and non-literary texts (or interpretations), but rather distinctions of degree, we find that here, too, the notion of "foregrounding" - useful as it is in capturing the experience of deriving extra effects in specific instances - is not at all useful in describing or explaining either the process or the results of this aspect of interpretation.

Let's look at a case of "foregrounded" metaphor to see how "natural" (or unreflective) interpretation may produce different results from "literary" (or more reflective) interpretation. We need to see if the "foregrounded" material has different effects in spontaneous and literary interpretations. The issue is whether there is a difference between the effects that follow from *looking for* "foregrounding", and those that follow from "foregrounding" *anyway*. We can return to the metaphor used in Dickens' description of Flintwinch:

(16) His head was awry, and he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, *as if his foundations had yielded at about the same time as the house*, and he ought to have been propped up in a

similar manner. (26; italics added)

This is a clear case of "foregrounded", striking metaphor. A reader coming across this passage will construct a context that includes a set of assumptions about houses, foundations, and the conditions under which foundations give way. He will process the utterance in this context, looking for implications that contribute to relevance. He may come up with a conception of a man who is collapsing into himself as a result of age and neglect. He may also derive an impression of mouldiness, deterioration and decline, all of which he will add to his image of the old man. If he has noticed that some older houses resemble human faces with their long tall facades, their high windows and slouching roofs, he may go further and arrive at an impression of Flintwinch's face. In each case, the reader is searching for ways to use his knowledge of houses in the condition described by the narrator in constructing a picture of the old man with his wry posture and rusty appearance.

All of this the reader may do quite naturally, as he would process an instance of metaphor or simile in ordinary speech. There is no real difference between the process by which a reader starts to construct an interpretation of (16) and the spontaneous process of interpreting conversational metaphor. The same reader, faced with

(17) That man is a walking encyclopedia.

will proceed exactly as he would with (16). That is, he will construct a context consisting of assumptions about "man", "encyclopedia", and "walking", and will derive implications about the man referred to, based on this background information. The difference between (16) and (17) is in the richness of the effects intended and achieved. This richness of effect is due to the novelty of the metaphor in (16), and the richness of background assumptions available for use as context.

But if that were the end of the story, then there would be no real difference between literary and spontaneous interpretations. Where exactly do these differences lie?

When a reader aims at a literary interpretation, he will not merely assume that whatever immediately strikes his attention in a manifestly deliberate way, is intended to achieve significant effects: he will seek out less obvious contrasts, metaphors that interact with other metaphors, repetitions that require some effort of memory to notice. And having noticed them, he will not be content until he sees how they were meant to put him on the track of additional effects. In this way, the literary reader greatly enriches the interpretation as a whole. By recognising the strategies the writer has employed in the past, the reader will

be alert to certain types of poetic effects that the casual reader might miss. Here the notion of "foregrounding" seems less appropriate than the relevance-theoretic notion of degrees of manifestness or accessibility.

If we think in these terms, we see the point of characterising "foregrounding", like manifestness, in terms of salience and intentionality. There are many ways in which a part of a text can draw our attention; but not all of these, as we shall see, contribute to overall relevance. For a part of the text to satisfy our sense that it is "foregrounded" we must be able to decide that its salience is intentional. In relevance-theoretic terms, the passage must make manifest or more manifest assumptions which will contribute to optimal relevance by increasing access to an intended range of effects.

Now the difference between the literary and the spontaneous interpretation of literary "foregrounding" lies not in the degree of manifestness or the specificity of the writer's intention. That is, a text may present "foregrounded" passages of varying salience; the intentions themselves may vary from specific to vague. The difference between literary and spontaneous interpretations lies in the reader who produces them. Both the literary and the spontaneous readers will have to process the "foregrounded" material; when this material is striking, as in (16), both are clearly encouraged to expend extra effort in the search for extra effects. When the "foregrounded" material is less salient and the intention less specific, the casual reader may not expend the effort needed to achieve poetic effects. The literary reader, however, since his aim is precisely to notice and process all intentionally salient aspects of the text, ought to act on any encouragement to achieve extra contextual effects - at least to the extent that he trust the writer to maintain a higher level of relevance, yielding richer interpretations, than less literary authors.

In this way we can see how "foregrounded" textual material that makes a wide range of assumptions only slightly more manifest, or which requires a good deal of extra effort, may be dismissed by the casual reader. In that case, we usually say that the reader aiming at a spontaneous interpretation has "missed" the "foregrounding". If "foregrounded" material is both salient and intentionally so, and if the writer can be trusted to maintain a high level of relevance, then we can see that such material should repay an extra expenditure of effort, effort that the casual reader may not be willing to invest.

Let's return to (16) for a moment, and consider why a literary reader ought to get more out of it than out of (17). Both are, after all, striking metaphors, even if (17) is conventional

and (16) is unusual. At first glance, there seems no qualitative distinction between them. (16) will only illustrate the nature of literary "foregrounding" if we put it in context, and consider how both examples operate in their actual or likely uses.

We can see how (17) could occur in casual conversation. In this kind of low-level information transfer, (17) requires some investment of effort to achieve adequate contextual effects. Until (17) becomes completely conventionalised, it is salient for many reasons in casual conversation, not the least of which is the sudden spike in processing effort demanded. It is far more salient in its most likely context, in fact, than (16) is in its actual context.

Recall that in the previous chapter we examined a series of descriptions of Flintwinch. In these passages, the descriptions led the reader increasingly to consider Flintwinch's "rusty" and "wry" or twisted attributes. We can, by constructing a context consisting of assumptions based on background knowledge about the appearance of twisted bodies and collapsing houses, derive implications relating to their similarity. But that effort increases the manifestness of only a fairly narrow set of assumptions, not the wide range which I have argued must be made slightly more manifest if relevance is to be achieved. We may be disappointed in this first attempt; and may notice that in the very dense prose in which (16) occurs, it is not nearly as salient in its actual environment as (17) would be in its likely context.

The literary reader, however, assumes that all "foregrounded" material is intended to make manifest or more manifest a certain range of assumptions, and thus achieve a certain range of effects. As he attempts to construct a context in which these intended effects can be derived, he may notice that there are very detailed descriptions of houses occurring throughout *Little Dorrit.* Houses are connected not just with atmosphere, or setting, but with the moral and physical condition of characters and society. The house where Flintwinch lives as the servant and partner of Arthur Clennam's mother is, it will develop, built on foundations that are in the process of collapsing, and in whose collapse he will ultimately be buried. The house is closely associated with Mrs Clennam's shattered physical condition - she is an invalid - and with the internal decay resulting from decades of repression, secrecy and criminal neglect.

Similarly, other houses are also described in terms that either connect them with the physical and moral condition of their inhabitants, or are frankly anthropomorphic. The similarity of house facades to human faces is exploited in several passages. Furthermore,

each significant change of condition in the central characters is preceded by a detailed description of their new lodgings. Consequently, we have detailed descriptions of prisons, inns, grand houses, backstage rooms, hotels, Venetian chateaux, terraced housing, the tumbledown houses of the poor, and the richly-decorated interiors of the salons of the wealthy. In a context consisting of assumptions made manifest by these frequent descriptions of houses, (16) achieves a good deal of relevance as part of a larger pattern that emerges, and which connects houses with the condition of their inhabitants. (16) neatly reverses this pattern, and so reinforces it.

The reader aiming at a spontaneous interpretation of *Little Dorrit* may not become conscious of this pattern. He may deal with each description separately, and since he is not aiming at making sense of all the evidence presented by the text, he may well ignore the encouragement to invest extra effort in processing these utterances. To the extent that he remains unconscious of the invitation he has declined, so to speak, we can speak of his having "missed" the "foregrounded" material. He has not actually missed it, of course, but has not invested the effort needed to achieve optimal relevance in interpreting it. The reader aiming at a literary interpretation, on the other hand, precisely aims at making sense of all the evidence presented by the text. He is therefore attempting to become conscious of all salient passages of the text, and to invest the extra effort needed to achieve optimal relevance. To that extent, then, this reader is looking for "foregrounded" material. What he is actually doing, of course, is attempting to become conscious of those points when the writer makes these claims on his attention, which are normally dealt with as part of the automatic interpretation process.

Most of the "foregrounded" evidence isn't noticed at first sight: that is, it is not consciously noted by the reader. I have already argued that we can understand "foregrounding" in relevance-theoretic terms, redefining it in terms of salience and intentionality. This would have the benefit of adhering fairly closely to the notion captured by Leech's description. However, the notion of "foregrounding", even with these alterations, is seriously flawed. For one thing, this notion assumes that only what is consciously noted in the interpretation process can be considered "foregrounded". Yet, it would be quite normal for the hearer of (17) to reach an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance without ever becoming conscious of the fact that the metaphor constitutes "foregrounding".

If we accept the traditional notion of "foregrounding", then we have a second serious

problem. I have noted that there are many ways in which utterances can be salient; the notion of "foregrounding" makes no principled distinction between textual elements that are salient without contributing to relevance, and those which are both salient and intentional. In other words, it cannot distinguish between ostensive and accidental information transfer, and so does not separate communicative from non-communicative acts.

Finally, we should notice that the accepted definitions of "foregrounding" make no connection with the effects that "foregrounding" is supposed to achieve. Although the notion captures the intuition that our attention is being drawn to the text for some purpose, it does not explain how the effects (or purpose) are achieved. The definition also fails to recognise the infinite variety of effects which "foregrounding" is supposed to produce. Consequently, we have a single cause pinpointed, but no way to account for the range of effects produced, nor why this range is infinitely various.

Yet we know also that the interpretive experience which the idea of "foregrounding" is supposed to capture is well-attested and important. I want to continue this examination of the notion of "foregrounding" in order to pursue the implications of describing the experience in terms of salience and intentionality. We will investigate a variety of "foregrounded" elements as they are assumed to work in two common techniques, repetition and irony, in both poetic and prose works. Bear in mind that we are examining the connection between salience and intention in terms of effects; and relying on the relevance-theoretic notion of manifestness and strength of implicatures to describe the effects that "foregrounding" has traditionally been ascribed.

4. Repetition and "foregrounding"

The notion of repetition is rarely properly defined. As Persson (1974) notes,

> Repetition is a term used with wide and varying connotations in both linguistics and stylistics. The term is usually felt to be self-explanatory, and no definitions are given. ... The common denominator [in the examples given] ... is that one concept is iterated in one form or another." (Persson 1974: 1)

Leech (1969) distinguishes between repetition and parallelism. He calls repetition "the exact copying of some previous part of a text (whether word, phrase, or even sentence) ... if there were merely a partial repetition, this would amount to a parallelism" (Leech 1969: 77). Here

the notion of copying is crucial. Notice that in this very paragraph there are many words and phrases that are identical to previous parts of the text; yet it is not obvious that all of them are repetitions or "copyings". But what exactly does "copying" mean, and how is it recognised? As for iterating a "concept", that, too, is unavoidable in a paper of this nature which is developing a complex argument on a single topic. Again, though the reader will recognise that I am returning to a central topic time and again, he will not likely conclude that I am using the rhetorical device of repetition. Some narrower definition will have to be found.

Let's start from the hypothesis that repetition involves *matching linguistic forms*: phonemes, words, phrases, sentences, or abstract patterns (usually grammatical). Pinning this description down further is actually quite difficult. Our intuitions tell us that both Leech and Persson are right: that iteration and copying are what repetition is about. The difficulty lies in distinguishing the rhetorical device of repetition ("foregrounded" repetition, in critical terms) from other kinds of repetition. There is the inevitable repetition that follows from the nature of syntax and the way the linguistic system uses the lexicon: because some of the basic items of grammar are quite restricted - "closed classes" such as auxiliary and modal verbs, for example, or determiners, conjunctions and pronouns - we should expect a lot of "accidental" repetition of these constituents. Again, because any phonemic system is also quite circumscribed, we will find a lot of "accidental" repetition of sounds, or parts of words. This we could call *incidental repetition*; in general it has no significant effect, and the reader is not intended to notice and exploit it.

There is also the type of repetition of syntactic form (parallelism in Leech's system) which is employed largely to save processing effort by allowing the reader to use the same processing strategy twice. Some examples of this kind of repetition are useful here:

(18) They deceived and hoodwinked all of us. (Persson 1974: 1)

(19) "Closed-circuit TV has made the world safer for pedestrians, passengers, and shoppers, but not NHS patients," [Roy Lilley, chairman of the Federation of NHS Trusts resources committee] said. (*The Sunday Times*, 19 March 1995, p 1)

(20) Breaches [of pollution limits put forward by the government] were also recorded for chromium from leather tanning and paint production; nickel from fuel oil and petrol; and phosphates from sewage and fertilisers that drain from farmland and are washed downriver. (*The Sunday Times*, 19 March 1995, p 24)

Each of (18-20) provides at least one case where repetition of a grammatical sequence

permits the reader to process the entire utterance at reduced effort, reusing the same type of context and deriving the same types of effects. This kind of parallelism is so frequently used that, like the repetition of basic linguistic constituents it is barely noticed in ordinary communication. The only example that draws attention to itself is (20); but here, too, we can see that the writer has condensed a list of pollution control breaches into a set of parallel instances. The repetition helps simplify a complex situation by separating its elements into a series of similar events. The internal repetitions ("sewage and fertilisers", "drain from farmland and are washed downriver") provide no such assistance and are less likely to be noticed.

None of these examples are what we are likely to consider "foregrounded" repetition. "Foregrounded" repetition, like incidental repetition, occurs quite commonly; we need to find a principled basis for distinguishing the two. Consider the following:

(21) He's very very happy.

(22) He's not not happy.

Neither of these utterances can be fully understood if the fact that a word has been repeated is not registered somewhere. Intuitively, though, in (22) the repetition is "foregrounded" in a way that it is not in (21). We might say that the system must register and deal with (21), but the repetition in (22) is likely to come to the individual's conscious attention.

Let's consider first how the repetition in (21) would be dealt with in relevance-theoretic terms. Repetition of the word "very" involves extra processing effort - more than would have been needed if the word had not been repeated - and therefore encourages a search for extra contextual effects. The reader processing (21) may interpret the repetition as having an intensifying effect. If (21) occurs in conversation, and the speaker habitually repeats elements of speech, then the hearer will likely discount the effect of the repetition. We can imagine another situation in which the repetition in (21) will have few intended effects: if the speaker is hesitating in choosing her adjective, and repeats the adverb as a way of filling in time, for example. And of course there are situations in which the repetition will have significant effects, if the speaker is being sarcastic, or mocking, for example. The range of intended effects is quite wide, from relatively insignificant to essential.

In the case of (22), however, the repetition is more striking, and is likely to come to conscious awareness. The grammatical system of English does not normally employ double negation; consequently, this repetition produces a problem for the linguistic system, which

may need conscious resolution. There are two main lines of grammatical interpretation:

(23a) He's not_2 [not_1 happy]. [=, roughly, "He's fairly happy"]

(23b) He's not, repeat, not happy. [= "He's really not happy"]

In (23a), the forms match, but each "not" performs a different semantic function. "Not_1" modifies the item "happy", while "not_2" modifies the phrase "not happy". The interpretation shown in (23a) indicates roughly that "he" is happy, more or less; this instance of repetition is intuitively similar to the rhetorical category litotes, in which something is asserted by negating its opposite.

The interpretation given in (23b) is of a case of formal repetition. Here not only do the surface forms match, but their semantic functions are identical as well. (23b) involves an intensifying use of "not" rather than any logical operation. These examples are designed to show that "foregrounding" a repetition does not guarantee a unique interpretation. "Foregrounding" must achieve intended effects, and deciding *which* effects were intended is an aspect of interpretation which falls under the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. In this aspect of interpretation, as in any other, the first acceptable interpretation is the only acceptable interpretation, and is the one the audience should choose. By the same token, the communicator should make sure, when "foregrounding" some expression, that the intended interpretation is as easy as possible for the audience to recover.

This in turn suggests a way of distinguishing incidental from "foregrounded" (intentionally salient) repetition. Having noticed a certain matching in linguistic forms, the reader should see whether it yields additional contextual effects in a way that the writer might manifestly have foreseen. If it does, he has good reason to conclude that it was deliberate; if it does not, and it *could* have been accidental, he may safely ignore it; if it does not, and it was manifestly not incidental, he should continue his search for additional effects. Here again, interpretation is a matter of making and confirming or disconfirming hypotheses; it is an inferential matter.

In the usual case of incidental repetition, the reader fails to notice that there has been any repetition at all. This failure results from either of two factors. Either the repetition costs no extra effort to process (as in the case of frequently repeated lexical items), or it saves processing effort (as in the case of normal repetition or parallelism). But just as there are instances of immediate repetition that barely qualify as "foregrounded" repetition (like 21), so too there are many instances of parallelism which, unlike (18-20), are clearly "fore-

grounded". Let's consider some cases of "foregrounded" repetition.

(24) Ill fares the land, to hastening ills a prey,
Where wealth accumulates, and men decay. (Leech 1969: 64)[47]

(25) The voice of my education said to me
He must be killed,
For in Sicily the black, black snakes are innocent, the gold are venomous. (from Lawrence, *Snake*)

These are both relatively simple examples, one of parallelism, one of repetition, both of which I am treating as cases of matching linguistic form.

Now most readers will probably agree that (24-25) are instances of "foregrounded" repetition, but the question is, why should this be the case when (18-21) are probably not? We come back to the basics of relevance theory: the balance between effort and effect. If we try to define "foregrounding" in terms of deviance (statistical or otherwise), we will find, as others have, that the argument terminates in a dead end. "Foregrounded" repetition is repetition which fulfils neither of two conditions: it does not come at a low processing cost (as (21) does, and as incidental repetition does), and it does not function solely to save linguistic processing effort (as 18-20 do).

This approach requires that we rethink our ideas about how the linguistic system recognises repetition in the first place. We have often been used - because in literary criticism and theory we concentrate naturally enough on the rhetorical instances of repetition - to assume that the reader notices all cases of repetition and then sees whether they say the same thing twice, at which point he searches for some effect the repetition is intended to achieve. We should take the opposite approach: we may assume that the reader does not look specifically for repetition (any more than he looks for metaphor, personification and hyperbole). Instead, since interpretation is a relevance-driven process, and since relevance always plays effort against effect, the reader's linguistic and interpretive faculties will function at the lowest level of effort that will yield an interpretation that is relevant enough.

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[47] The "element of contrast" in this couplet is actually quite complex. Goldsmith is not really contrasting the waxing of wealth and the waning of men, or at least, not just doing this. If he were, we would be justified in concluding that these were opposite states, and that the reverse condition - where men accumulate, and wealth decays - would be a good situation. But this is insupportable. Instead we might consider that the ills occur because the people do not have the qualities necessary to manage increased wealth. The contrast is not between wealth and morality, but between the condition of the land under good and ill management of wealth.

When repetition (and parallelism) saves effort - as it often does - and has no effect besides this, then interpretation is automatic and does not need to be recognised. In these cases, we can say the repetition is not "foregrounded".

However, when the repetition (and parallelism), as in (24-25), actually increases processing effort, then the conscious inferential and interpretive processes are engaged. They will look to see if it is to be considered along the lines of (23b) or (23a). This second "streaming" process brings us to the repetition we have been looking for: "foregrounded" formal repetition. To see what kinds of effects the writer might be aiming to achieve at the cost of this extra processing we should consider some examples in depth. In the next section I will look at Tichborne's *Elegy* for examples of repetition and parallelism in poetry; and in the section after that I will consider Dickens' *Little Dorrit* for some of the uses of repetition in prose.

5. Repetition in poetry: Tichborne' *Elegy*

Phonetic repetition is extremely common in poetry. In oral literature, this is hardly surprising since phonetic repetition is also linked to ease of memorisation. Tichborne's *Elegy* provides examples of how other kinds of patterns, especially syntactic ones, can be exploited for the purpose of communicating or reinforcing an intended effect.

(26) My prime of life is but a frost of cares,
My feast of joy is but a dish of pain,
My crop of corn is but a field of tares,
And all my good is but vain hope of gain;
The day is past, and yet I saw no sun,
And now I live, and now my day is done.

My tale was heard and yet it was not told,
My fruit is fall'n and yet my leaves are green,
My youth is spent and yet I am not old,
I saw the world and yet I was not seen;
My thread is cut and yet it is not spun,
And now I live, and now my life is done.

I sought my death and found it in my womb,

I looked for life and saw it was a shade,
I trod the earth and knew it was my tomb,
And now I die, and now I was but made
My glass is full, and now my glass is run,
And now I live, and now my life is done. (Tichborne, *Elegy*)

I have reproduced the whole poem because it's important to see that the patterns I pointed out in (9) are not confined to a single stanza, and that the pattern of the first stanza is repeated twice more.

There are several similar grammatical patterns repeated throughout the poem, and some of them, those most frequently repeated, might be described as follows:

(27a) My x of y is but an a of b: where (x, y) and (a, b) describe contrasting or opposing conditions or relations.

(27b) My x is y and yet (my x) is z: where (y) and (z) describe contrasting or opposing conditions or relations.

(27c) I x my y and a (that [y was b]): where (x) and (a), and (y) and (b) describe incompatible or opposing conditions or relations.

(27d) And now a and now not-(a).

All of (27a-d) are paradoxes: that is, each line asserts that a condition exists at the same time and in the same person as an opposing condition. Paradoxes are logical impossibilities, for a thing cannot both be and "not-be" at the same time and place and in the same person. One of the conjunctions "but", "yet", and "and" is used in each line, however, so we know that a paradox is being asserted.

Paradoxes may be logically impossible, but they are fruitful in communication, for by posing a problem that is superficially insoluble they force the reader to develop his interpretation beyond the obvious. A poet who uses paradox encourages her reader to resolve the contradiction in any one of a number of ways. In the case of Tichborne's *Elegy*, for example, the reader may interpret the poem as the speaker's lament for lost time, or missed opportunities. The speaker, he may conclude, finding that his death is nearer than he thought, is expressing regret for the brevity of the time left to him and the waste he has made of his chances.

There is evidence left unaccounted for by this line of interpretation, though. The poet insists on the *identity* of the speaker's present life with his imminent death ("And *now* I die

and *now* I was but made"). This relation of identity forces a reconsideration of the poem beyond mere regret for lost time to something more immediate and pressing. Indeed, the determined series of variations on a single pattern (as (27 a-d) really are just variants on the pattern of the identity of opposites) implicates an insistence on the reality of an impossible situation, the coexistence of life and death in a single person at a single time. We might go beyond the first, rather dull reading, and develop a line of interpretation around the poet's intention to communicate the power of the realization that he is mortal, and that his death is imminent. This is better, perhaps, but still unsatisfactory.

Most editors who include the *Elegy* in anthologies (there are no other poems of Tichborne routinely included; there may be no others extant) usually title the poem as "Tichborne's *Elegy*, written with his own hand in the Tower before his execution" and include a brief biographical note to the effect that Chidiock Tichborne was executed at the age of 18 (or 28) in September 1586 for his part in the Babington plot against the Queen. The effect these extra contextual premises have on an interpretation of the poem is electrifying, to judge by most students' reaction to them. They typically and spontaneously express horror. The poem suddenly goes beyond expressing a hackneyed (and for young people, almost inaccessible) version of Wordsworth's "intimations of mortality" and suddenly and aptly communicates the sense a very young man might have while he is facing death not from decline, disease or accident, but from execution. Such a man, acutely aware of his present existence, and able to look ahead, has become painfully conscious that at a point which he can presently envision he will have ceased to exist; that his death is both inevitable and unnatural. Such consciousness has in this case sharpened his feeling of being alive, and made him face his imminent death which, given the strength of his sense of life, seems almost impossible.

Tichborne's poem, then, is an interesting illustration of how biographical information may be crucial to constructing a context in which the writer's intention can be recognised. With the assumptions made accessible by this premise we can develop an acceptable literary interpretation of the poem that is guided by recognition of the effects Tichborne was likely attempting to achieve. Without these assumptions we can only develop generalised interpretive frameworks. The reason for Tichborne's insistent use of contradiction and paradox is also more manifest. He is not so much using the apprehension of imminent death as a metaphor for the sensation of wasted time as he is describing the emotions a young man

facing execution is experiencing. Now the force of these lines is comprehensible; the reader's sympathy having been engaged by his knowledge of the situation, he may feel the tone of the poem is tragic rather than theatrical and exaggerated.

What is striking about the poem is the degree to which repetition contributes to the overall interpretation, and to some of its most crucial effects. Recall that earlier I said that when a reader is aiming for a literary interpretation, he expends efforts which are to be "cashed-out" in a particular way - adding to or confirming a central set of implications. Those strategies which are significant, which a literary interpretation must identify and explain, are exactly the "foregrounded" ones. "Foregrounded" strategies (like repetition in these two poems) are meant to be noticed precisely in order to confirm or add to the central set of implications the writer intended to communicate. This set, once identified and enriched by subsequent processing, is indispensable to any context in which the work (or any part of it) is processed.

In the *Elegy*, repetition is important because it helps the reader identify - automatically or consciously - the central set of implications which the writer intended him to recover. These will be very strongly manifest in the context the reader is intended to use. For Tichborne's readers, the crucial set of implications centres on the assumption that the speaker is a very young man of refinement, intelligence and sensitivity (the elegance of the structure, the range of comparisons and the lexical choices are evidence for these characteristics) who faces imminent death. Here the repetition functions emphatically (repeating the same idea to drive it home) while imitating the tolling of a bell. Far from being an "ornament", repetition is central to conveying the writer's intention.

We have seen that a writer may achieve quite a range of effects through a single device, the use of matching forms. We have also seen that the effects may vary in several ways. The reader aiming at an interpretation that is relevant enough will likely conclude that Tichborne has astutely and effectively evoked the mental condition of a young man facing execution. These are only descriptions, of course, of the actual interpretation such a reader may produce. In fact, he should experience a range of poetic effects, as a very wide range of assumptions is made slightly more manifest.

We've looked briefly at the use of repetition, of units and of patterns, in a short work. As I've mentioned, repetition, especially of sound, is commonplace enough in poetry. However, repetition is equally (if differently) important in prose works. Here, the repetition

may be of units or of patterns. In long works such as novels, the writer may repeat patterns of imagery, or of relationship, or of events. The scope for repetition, rather than being restricted in prose, is in many ways expanded, as I now hope to show.

It's hard to predict the role repetition may play in relatively short works such as Tichborne's. For one thing, the effects vary greatly, not only between poems but within them. In the *Elegy*, although each successive line more or less varies the basic pattern of paradox, there are important distinctions between saying that two things exist at the same time ("And now I live, and now my life is done") and saying that a particular condition turns out to be its opposite ("I looked for life and saw it was a shade"). What's more, both differ again from asserting that something has ended and that it has not yet occurred ("My thread is cut and yet it is not spun"). The fact is, as Persson puts it

> It is one of the difficulties of describing this phenomenon [repetition] that almost every case is a unique one. (Persson 1974: 57)

We need to look at a long work, such as a novel, to see how "foregrounded" repetition contributes to interpretation, and why "almost every case" is "unique". These are two quite separate issues, but they can be addressed by looking at the use of repetition in Dickens' *Little Dorrit*.

6. Repetition in prose: Dickens' *Little Dorrit*

In the previous chapter I briefly discussed one way Dickens exploited repetition when I looked at vagueness in communication. To demonstrate the richness of Dickens' use of "foregrounded" repetition in this novel, I will be choosing entirely unrelated examples of repetition. Some occur in characters' speech; others in the narrative; some are repeated descriptions (like the description of Flintwinch discussed in Chapter 2); and others occur in conversations between characters. These instances include immediate repetition (like (10)), free repetition of specific items (like (11)) and the repetition of patterns. In considering Dickens' repetition of patterns we will look also at how he repeats and varies patterns of images, particularly prison imagery, by looking at his descriptions of Merdle. Let's begin by looking at immediate repetition, as in (10).

This type of repetition tends to occur in conversations, although Persson notes that it is common enough in narrative when used intensively (Persson 1974: 30). Repeated nouns

generally have one of two effects; Persson says they may serve "as the equivalent of phrases expressing great number or quantity" or may stress "the exclusiveness of the concept with regard to other items" and thus convey *nothing but* + *N*. Depending on the circumstances, of course, this kind of repetition may do both:

(28) Nothing to see but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to breathe but streets, streets, streets. Nothing to change the brooding mind, or raise it up. (23)

(28) underscores the fact discussed in the last chapter. No paraphrase can produce the effects of the original and not because "originality" is special in any way. The original phrase produces effects not by communicating a determinate proposition or set of propositions, but by making slightly more manifest a wide range of assumptions. Persson points out that "[u]sually both notions are present with greater or lesser force" (1974: 46), which doesn't help us understand how a case of nouns repeated for intensifying effect can do either.

In fact, if repetition is not an effect but a strategy, then we should not expect that the category of forms which are matched should determine the effect regardless of the writer's intention. Looking at (28), then, we see that there are several kinds of repetition employed. "Streets" is repeated immediately, twice. "Nothing" is repeated in the subject position three times. And two patterns are repeated; the three sentences are very similar grammatically, and a second parallel structure is embedded in the third sentence. What is interesting is that the intended effects are not entailed by the repetitions themselves. What are these effects, and why should we not be able to generalise the effects of repetition?

As Persson noted, (28) conveys the sense of quantity and exclusiveness. This effect is achieved sufficiently, we might think, by the first sentence of (28); yet Dickens repeats that sentence with almost no variation ("breathe" for "see"), and then repeats the pattern of the first part of these sentences. It seems it's not enough for Dickens to convey the idea that there are a lot of streets, and that they offer scant prospect for pleasure or relief. By repeating the word "streets" and the pattern of the sentence in which it occurs Dickens encourages the reader to expend effort for what are initially very few effects. The reader who, aiming at a literary interpretation, is paying attention to the effects achieved by his spontaneous interpretation, may notice how tedious it is to process all that useless repetition. Dickens, like the other writers I have discussed, is using repetition to encourage the reader to experience some aspect of the concept he is describing.

This is not the limit of the effects achieved by the repetition in (28). We know that

we feel tired - that is, that we have achieved inadequate effects for the effort we've made in processing all this extra material - reading this tedious passage. But Dickens directs us to the long-term effects of such tedium on those who are condemned to suffer it indefinitely: they have *nothing but* tedium and boredom. There is "Nothing to change the brooding mind" he tells us; minds stimulated to useless effort will find other outlets, will "brood". And there is nothing "to raise it up", strongly implicating that these outlets will be destructive. In (28), then, Dickens encourages the reader to enter the condition of those who are condemned to just the kind of useless (mental) activity he has initially demanded of us, and predicted its consequences. Such effects may well start with the concept of quantity and exclusiveness, but in this particular case they go well beyond them.

I would suggest that this is so every time repetition (or any strategy) is used effectively. Indeed, even ostensibly ineffective repetition can have far-reaching effects if subjected to a literary interpretation. One character in the novel is identified by his futile and compulsive conversational repetitions. Christopher Casby, whose daughter Arthur Clennam loved when he was a boy, is sarcastically nicknamed "The Patriarch" for his benevolent appearance which contrasts with his useless and even grasping actions. Casby's personal impotence, which is eventually revealed as an inability to act for himself, is exposed in the way he talks:

(29a) "Your respected mother was rather jealous of her son, maybe; when I say her son, I mean your worthy self, your worthy self." (122)

(29b) "I do myself the pleasure of making a visit to your respected mother occasionally, and of admiring the fortitude and strength of mind with which she bears her trials, bears her trials." (123)

(29c) "Mr Clennam, I am glad to see you. I hope you are well, sir, I hope you are well. Please to sit down, please to sit down." (450)

(29d) "Not so, not so," said the Patriarch, "not so." (450)

(29e) "Dear, dear, dear!" said the Patriarch, "how very unfortunate... A fine full-coloured young woman, Mr Clennam, with very dark hair and very dark eyes. If I mistake not, if I mistake not?" (450)

(29f) "I may not see her again for a long, long time. I may never see her again. What a pity, what a pity!" (450)

(29g) "...You are made to do your duty, but you don't do your duty. You are paid to squeeze, and

you must squeeze to pay." The Patriarch so much surprised himself by this brilliant turn, after Dr Johnson, which he had not in the least expected or intended, that he laughed aloud; and repeated with great satisfaction, as he twirled his thumbs "Paid to squeeze, sir, and must squeeze to pay." (665)

(29h) "Perhaps I shall find you here when I come back. If not, sir, duty, duty; squeeze, squeeze, squeeze, on Monday; squeeze on Monday!" (666)

Normally this kind of repetition would be emphatic; that is, it would draw "extra attention to a concept ... for purposes of focus or contrast, or in order to impart some emotive connotation" (Persson 1974: 50). Presumably Casby is using the repetition for this effect: to emphasise the concept expressed. Still, the effect of the repetition is precisely to empty the words of force, and to reduce them to meaninglessness. The narrator suggests that this effect is deliberate:

(30) When he made one of these little repetitions, ... he did it ... as if he had something in his thoughts too sweetly profound to be put into words. As if he denied himself the pleasure of uttering it, lest he should soar too high; and his meekness therefore preferred to be unmeaning. (123)

Again, we should ask first not so much why Dickens achieves this effect - we can account for it as part of his method of characterisation - but how. There is no reason why this repetition should be ineffective, and other cases, superficially very similar, should not:

(31) Sloane: Oh, you bleeding maniac! My leg. My leg. (Persson 1974: 68)

(32) The Headmaster regarded Cole again. "Come, boy," he said in a terrible voice. "I think you can guess what we are all here for." Cole shook his head: Gerald's heart was beating heavily. "The weights," said Mr Pemberton in thrilling tones. "The weights, the weights." (Persson 1974: 67).

Neither of these instances produces effects similar to (29a-h); the Orton example (31) may be spoken in a variety of ways, expressing a range of emotions from anger to despair, while in the excerpt from Fuller, Pemberton's "thrilling tones" may reveal his pomposity but are intended to impress his hearer with the gravity of the situation. We may accept that the purpose of repetition in cases we can roughly call emphatic is to increase the strength of the proposition expressed, and thus increase its relevance. If that is the case, then we may see that Casby's repetition puts the reader to extra effort without any corresponding increase in effect. The repetition, intended as emphatic, fails to convince. Casby generally repeats items which involve low levels of information transfer, and which have relatively few effects even

if not repeated. His intentions are discounted. The result is precisely as Dickens has described it: to suggest profundity while conveying very little.

Dickens uses Casby's ineffective repetitiveness to characterise him. But Casby is not the only speaker in Little Dorrit to repeat himself in his speech. Little Dorrit herself is given to epizeuxis, and her father's tendency to repeat himself is aggravated in moments of anxiety.

(33) "Father, father!"

"O despise me, despise me! Look away from me, don't listen to me, stop me, blush for me, cry for me- Even you, Amy! Do it, do it! I do it to myself." (191)

We might think that (33) bears out Persson's explanation, for here surely Dorrit's repetition of "despise me" and "do it" indicate some strong emotion on the speaker's part. But we must remember that we are looking, really, at two uses of repetition: the speaker's and the writer's. The writer may be using repetition merely as characterisation (as Dickens does in (29a-h)), or for some other purpose; and since it is the writer's and not the speaker's intention we are ultimately to recognise, it's important to maintain this distinction.

We can see that Little Dorrit's repetition "Father, father" is clearly emphatic. Persson rather unhelpfully compiles a series of similar examples and states that they convey "various emotions or attitudes, such as tenderness, endearment, reproof, etc" (1974: 70), but again without showing why or how. To repeat a person's name is to make a very strong claim on his attention, but the purposes of that claim will vary from one situation to another. In the scene in which (33) occurs, Little Dorrit is attempting to draw her father's attention away from whatever is agitating him and towards herself so that she can comfort him. She may also be attempting to soothe him by expressing tenderness, contrition or affection. Her father's repetition, on the other hand, has a very different effect.

Like his daughter, Dorrit repeats words and phrases in moments of strong emotion. Like her, he also habitually repeats himself. If repetition entailed a particular range of effects, we would then expect both characters to resemble Casby to some degree, and to be ineffectual communicators who act primarily through agents. While all three share a degree of powerlessness, repetition has strikingly different effects in each case.

We have already seen how Casby is characterised by his use of repetition: it marks him as a blowhard. Little Dorrit, a frail, tiny creature, is physically and socially powerless to aid herself and others. Since she is impotent in these ways, we might think she will resemble Casby in others and be a weak character. On the contrary, she is the strongest

character in the novel, the point towards which all other characters turn. Her strength is emotional and moral, and her tendency to repeat herself in conversation is not so much a sign of weakness as it is an exposure of the tenderness of her heart. This tenderness is exquisite; it causes pain rather than pleasure as she takes on the burdens of the rest of the family and works to protect them from the buffets of their degraded lives. As she exposes her vulnerability time and again, in part through her repetition (and the strong emotions it reveals), we come to admire the indomitability of spirit that allows her to suffer so deeply and persevere so generously. If we look at her reasons for repetition, we see that she repeats herself emphatically, as Persson notes. But Dickens uses this habit for a very different purpose from any of the examples provided by Persson, and even from the example provided by another of his characters: not really to "impart some emotive connotation" to Little Dorrit's words but to encourage the reader to discover a range of conclusions about her.

Little Dorrit's father's tendency to repeat himself produces still other effects. As (33) demonstrates, Dorrit uses both immediate sequential repetition ("Do it, do it!") and parallelism ("stop me, blush for me, cry for me"). Like his daughter, he habitually repeats himself when he is anxious; but as (33) indicates, and as other passages confirm, he has a strong histrionic tendency as well. If anything, his variations on a repeated pattern heighten the emotions he claims to be undergoing, or wishes to create in others; they occur in an ascending scale of strength ("stop", "blush", "cry"). His speech, in fact, resembles the progress as well as the condition of hysteria.

Dorrit has been confined to the Marshalsea debtors' prison for over twenty-three years; one of the recurring images of the novel is of the weary round or track that the debtors trace repeatedly as they move in this confined space. Dorrit's conversational (and, as it will prove, mental and spiritual) tendency to reiteration also resembles this "round", going over emotions and ideas until they become obsessions. In (33), as in other similar passages, his long imprisonment, and the neurotic effects it has had on him, are expressed by his conversational impoverishment. The hysterical tone of much of this repetition, especially when he is overwrought, conveys the damage done to a hesitating and genteel man by showing its effects on his thought and speech.

Again, we can distinguish between the effects Dorrit wishes to achieve by repeating himself, and the effects Dickens produces by putting these words in his character's mouth. Dorrit is drawing attention to the idea he intends to communicate; he may also wish to

impress the hearer with the depth and sincerity of his emotions (remorse, repentance, shame) by repeating a grammatical pattern, each variation expressing a more intense emotional state than the one before. He needs to demonstrate his emotions rather than just express them. Dickens, on the other hand, directs our attention to Dorrit's tendency to repeat himself so that we may come to see these demonstrations as habitual rather than sincere; since Dorrit is not an entirely unsympathetic character, we can see that his hysteria is to some degree quite real, and trace it to the effects of his confinement, physical, mental and moral.

We have seen how repetition can be used in very similar ways to achieve very different effects. We also need to see, though, that repetition in prose can go well beyond sequential or parallel matching forms. A writer may exploit an abstract pattern - say, imagery - over the course of a long novel, to achieve very wide-ranging effects. At the same time, we should expect that such a pattern, especially if not confined to the characterisation of a single person, may direct the reader along the same line of interpretation time and again. The central set of assumptions thus made highly manifest, once identified, becomes part of the context used to process almost every other part of the work. I want to use a series of descriptions of Merdle, the capitalist-swindler, to explore how this use of repetition might work.

Notice that (34a-g) below resemble the series of descriptions of Flintwinch in the previous chapter. As in that case, these descriptions tend to pick out salient aspects time and again. Unlike the descriptions of Flintwinch, however, it seems we are not encouraged to develop the metaphors and descriptions here. Recall that Flintwinch, initially described as he is in (16), is eventually reduced to the station of "a rusty screw in gaiters" through a chain of associations and developments. With the descriptions of Merdle, however, there is no such change:

(34a) ...[Mr Merdle] was a reserved man with ... a somewhat uneasy expression about his coat-cuffs as if they were in his confidence, and had reasons for being anxious to hide his hands. (207)

(34b) [Mr Merdle] stood looking out at a distant window, with his hands crossed under his uneasy coat-cuffs, clasping his wrists as if he were taking himself into custody. (331)

(34c) ...[Mr Merdle's] sluggish blood and his long coat-cuffs became quite agitated. (465)

(34d) ...[Mr Merdle] clasped himself by the wrists in that constabulary manner of his... (466)

(34e) [Mr Merdle] was slowly coming out of a long abstraction, in the course of which he had been fitting a table-spoon up his sleeve. ... [Mr Merdle] put the spoon aside, and clumsily [hid]

each of his hands in the coat-cuff of the other hand. (470)

(34f) Mr Merdle was slinking about the hearthrug, waiting to welcome Mrs Sparkler. His hand seemed to retreat up his sleeve as he advanced to do so, and he gave her such a superfluity of coat-cuff that it was like being received by the popular conception of Guy Fawkes. When he put his lips to hers, besides, he took himself into custody by the wrists, and backed himself among the ottomans, and chairs and tables, as if he were his own Police officer... (513)

(34g) Mr Merdle ... was by this time taking himself into custody under both coat-sleeves. (585)

Several phrases are repeated, virtually verbatim, several times in this series. We read of Merdle's "coat-cuffs" (207, 331, 465, 470, 513); we see him "taking himself into custody" (331, 585) and "clasping his wrists" (331, 466); once, indeed, to ensure we see the connection between these two actions, Merdle takes "himself into custody by the wrists" (513). His manner is "uneasy" (207, 331). Related concepts are repeatedly associated with him. He has a "constabulary manner" of clasping his wrists (466); this characteristic action makes him seem "as if he were his own Police officer" (513). Not only do these long, "agitated" (465) "coat-sleeves" (585) conceal his hands, so that he resembles "the popular conception of Guy Fawkes", but when he is absent-minded he attempts to fit "a table-spoon up his sleeve". Detected in this act, he hides his hands inside his sleeves (207, 470, 513).

This is an illustration of the repetition of semantic rather than purely grammatical forms (cf Persson's view of repetition as involving matching of concepts). Although there are some variations among these descriptions of Merdle's appearance and actions, they are essentially repeating the information provided in the first description.

How does this repetition work? Recall that in the relevance-theoretic framework, all newly-presented information must (be intended to) achieve adequate contextual effects for no unjustifiable effort. Often, repetitions which contain no new information, act as reminders. But if Dickens merely wants us to recall Merdle's characteristics, he should refer to them in a way that puts us to a minimum of effort for the minimal effects we will achieve. In the case of Flintwinch, as we have already seen, Dickens does just that. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, the humorous effect of Flora Finching's description of Flintwinch is achieved in part because we understand both the aptness and the impenetrability of her portrait. I have argued that caricature is often achieved by this kind of cognitive short-hand.

However, no such short-cuts are being employed here. Indeed, a late description of Merdle's actions (513) is more detailed than the first. In that case we might expect that this

is a character who has developed over the course of the novel; but Merdle is only a very minor character, almost a cypher. Yet we don't necessarily feel that the repetitions are a waste of time and effort. This would suggest that Dickens does achieve some effects through the repetition, effects which could not have been more economically achieved.

Little Dorrit opens in one prison and closes as its main characters emerge from another. It is a novel about prisons of all sorts: physical, mental, social, emotional, spiritual, moral. The idea of confinement is explored in a very wide number of ways, through every single character who occurs. Not one person is free from the prison taint, or from confinement of some kind. As we might expect, since confinement is the punishment for crime, criminals crop up frequently. We are a long way from Bill Sikes, though, and the criminals we encounter - Merdle, Rigaud, Dorrit - are all, in their way, genteel. The falseness of this gentility is itself one of the topics of the novel. If anything, *Little Dorrit* exposes the attempts each of the characters makes to conceal his criminality and so escape imprisonment. Dickens goes farther even than this, however. He demonstrates through the lives and fortunes of his characters how this concealment becomes the greatest of all prisons. Those who are unaware of their incarceration can take no steps towards liberty.

The descriptions of Merdle then become more evidence for this central bit of information. In turn, as we use these assumptions to construct the context in which (34a-g) are processed, we can achieve a wide range of effects. We notice now that Merdle's efforts to conceal his hands resemble both the criminal (207, 331) and the policeman (331, 513, 585). Clearly, Merdle's efforts are directed primarily toward shrouding his nature from others rather than from himself.

Dickens' comparing him with Guy Fawkes is especially fruitful. Fawkes tried to bring down the government of his country by blowing up the Houses of Parliament; he is still burned in effigy yearly throughout Britain. Children traditionally begged for "a penny for the Guy", so that he is connected with begging as well as with criminality. We can, by recalling the central set of assumptions I have just described, find even this single comparison (a variation on earlier descriptions) effective. Just as the Guy is an effigy, so Merdle is a "hollow man", his financial empire built on forgery and lies; his companies, like himself, are empty. Since he is associated with Parliament (as a member, as a supporter of its corruption and beneficiary of its favours), his downfall threatens those most closely connected with him: another way of "blowing up" Parliament, his ruin, like all financial scandals of sufficient

scope, threatens the stability of the country. Others have used him, his companies, name and influence, to acquire money for useless or empty schemes. Most of all, Merdle remains both reviled and celebrated, as Fawkes is; the dimensions of his fraud are heroic though he is revealed to be "a heavily-made man, with an obtuse head, and coarse, mean, common features" (590). In the context we have been constructing, all of these implications are highly relevant; that is, they lead the reader to achieve even more contextual effects.

Parallelism is a form of repetition. Parallel structures, which encourage the comparison of events and characters, may allow the linguistic system to pick out matching forms, but more importantly, they allow the reader to detect *matching concepts*. We know that "foregrounded" repetition must have some effects, because otherwise the reader would be asked to process old information gratuitously. In that case, repetition would be literally irrelevant. When what is repeated is abstract, like patterns of images or recurring characteristics, then the reader aiming at a literary interpretation must seek to notice as many instances of it as he can. He knows that these patterns themselves are intended as relevant, and should produce effects. As my brief discussion of the comparison of Merdle and Guy Fawkes has shown, even a single instance, if processed in a context including one of the writer's central intentions, can be fruitful. I have argued that we can think of the writer's central intentions as a set of intended implications which are highly relevant in their own right, and which make a major contribution to the relevance of the text as a whole.

Relevance theory provides more than just a way of accounting for "foregrounded" repetition as a rhetorical device. It explains why each case of repetition will produce "unique" effects. Persson's and others' works on repetition strongly suggest that the repetition of certain categories (nouns, verbs, adjectives and so on) may be initially directed by the grammatical or semantic systems; this initial interpretive direction would account for the intuition many people have that verbs of one kind produce one sort of effect when repeated (35-36), while the repetition of verbs of another produce a quite different effect (37).

(35) Peter hit him and hit him.

(36) The train came and went, came and went.

(37) Mary suffered, suffered, suffered. (see Persson 1974: 47)

However, once the utterance has been identified as a particular kind of repetition, and once those initial effects have been achieved, the interpretive process follows exactly the same strategy I have been describing throughout. The reader will seek to recognise the writer's

intentions, and accept the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

In this interpretive framework, the reader recognises "foregrounded" repetition (consciously if he is aiming at a literary interpretation; more or less unconsciously or automatically if he is a casual reader) and automatically constructs contexts in which the repeated material will have adequate effects for no unjustifiable effort, in a way the writer could reasonably have foreseen. If after several attempts he finds he cannot cash out his efforts, he will likely dismiss the utterance or work as poorly written, or boring, or not worth his time. The point is, though, that this is the *conclusion* of his efforts rather than the starting point for them.

I want to extend the discussion of "foregrounding" beyond formal strategies. Irony is not normally considered under the heading of "foregrounding", but if we take Leech's definition of tropes then clearly irony is included. As a trope, irony should work by "foregrounding" an "irregularity of content". In fact, irony has been discussed in exactly these terms. Let's see how we can develop our understanding of literary interpretation and "foregrounding" by turning our attention there.

7. Irony: a relevance-theoretic view

I have chosen irony as a companion to repetition so that this chapter will have looked at "foregrounding" in representative types of figurative language. At the outset I mentioned Leech's distinction between schemes and tropes. Recall that schemes are "foregrounded" repetitions of expression, and tropes are "foregrounded" irregularities of content. Irony is not often found in discussions of foregrounding, but there is some evidence that it can be treated in rather general terms as a kind of foregrounding. As we shall see, however, fitting irony (perhaps the representative trope of attitude) into the notion of foregrounding takes a good deal of work.

One of the few discussions that explicitly links foregrounding and irony is Kaufer and Neuwirth's "Foregrounding norms and ironic communication" (Kaufer and Neuwirth 1982). For them, a concept is foregrounded "if a speaker or writer can assume that the audience has the concept actively in mind" (Kaufer and Neuwirth 1982: 29). This indicates that they are using the old/new information sense of foregrounding; however, the argument is made within a general Gricean framework, in which the authors explain that the ironist communicates her

intention "by inferentially foregrounding *norms*" (Kaufer and Neuwirth 1982: 30). These norms may then be applied or violated.

Most accounts of irony and foregrounding take approximately the same approach. It is supported by a much larger literature about the relationship between poetic and verbal communication, or literary and non-literary texts. To characterise the reader's role in poetic communication as "*communicative role play*" (Firle 1990: 427) is to open the door to masquerade, a much older account of the basis of irony. On the other hand, when Meyszies characterises literary narrative texts in terms of a "binary opposition [that] marks the borderline between the space or semantic field" (Meyszies 1990: 519), we can see another way of stating the classical description of irony as "saying one thing and meaning the opposite". Furthermore, Meyszies' claim that, by taking a view of the literary narrative based on the interplay of cognitive schemata, the "single antagonistic constellation according to which the space has been divided is replaced by a more complex structure, in which the plurality of semantic spaces (binary oppositions) ... is dominant" (1990: 519) could be used to support the current view of irony as a mode of organising thought (as has been claimed for metaphor and metonymy).

All of these approaches are based, however freely, on the assumptions underlying the notion of "foregrounding". I have been arguing that the notion of "foregrounding", while intuitively sound, needs to be rethought and reformulated on a principled basis. I have argued that "foregrounding" always involves extra effort by the reader, but does so with the implicit guarantee that there will be extra effects as a result. This notion of "foregrounding" flows directly from the principle of relevance, and from the connection between effort and effect in the reader's attempt to recognise the writer's intention, that is at the heart of relevance theory.

Irony presents an especially interesting case of figures of thought, for precisely these reasons. While many metaphors may be easily recognised (think of the Yeats poem discussed in Chapter 2), irony may be so difficult to recognise that it is missed altogether. It therefore presents a challenge to my definition of "foregrounding", and perhaps more generally to the application of relevance theory to literary interpretation. After all, if irony is not recognised, how will relevance theory account for this oversight? How does the fact that Twain's ironic intention in *Huckleberry Finn* is often misunderstood, fit into a relevance-theoretic approach to literature?

Irony represents a challenge both to the general category of figures of thought, and to traditional notions of foregrounding. In the account I will give of irony, it will also prove to be another kind of repetition. Just as we can repeat forms, we can repeat, or re-present, ideas or propositions. It is as an echo of propositions that Sperber and Wilson have analyzed irony.

Sperber and Wilson (1981, 1986a: 237-243) and Wilson and Sperber (1992) have sketched a new approach to irony that is proving fruitful. Before going into this approach, I want to summarise the weaknesses of most current accounts of irony and use the relevance-theoretic approach to analyse a small set of examples. I will then look at the use of irony in Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. As before, I will distinguish between a literary and spontaneous (or "natural") interpretation of the novel. In this case, the recognition of irony - and in a literary interpretation, the recognition that this attitude has been "foregrounded" - is crucial to recognising Twain's intention. In fact, it has been the failure to recognise Twain's irony that has earned the novel its unsavoury reputation.

Traditionally, tropes are assumed to involve an "irregularity of content", to be deviations from a norm of literal truthfulness. As a result, a (true) figurative meaning is substituted for the (false) literal meaning. Different tropes involve different procedures for finding the figurative meaning, Verbal irony is claimed to communicate the opposite of what was literally said. Say that Peter arrives at Mary's door unshaved, rumpled and in badly creased clothes. If Mary says sarcastically

(38) You look well.

the most natural interpretation of (38) might be

(39) You look terrible.

(39) is the opposite of (38). These kinds of cases fit the usual definition of verbal irony. The problem is that there are many utterances which we recognise as ironic, but which do not fit this definition at all. These fall into three main categories: ironical understatements, ironical quotations, and ironical interjections. There are also utterances that conform to the definition but which we do not recognise as ironic. Let's consider an example of each type.

Take Mercutio's comment on his death-wound:

(40) No, 'tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church-door; but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. (Wilson and Sperber 1992: 55)

Although understatements are usually supposed to say less than what is meant, it is hard to

see how we are to deal with ironical understatements such as this. Clearly the speaker does not want to imply that the wound is superficial and that he will recover, even though we recognise that the utterance is ironic.

As for ironic quotations, we can imagine someone standing on Westminster Bridge on a miserably rainy, cold day with low clouds and thick polluting fog. As she looks toward the Docklands development to the east, and to the squat, dirty buildings clustered on the west side of the bridge, she says

(41) Earth hath not anything to show more fair; dull would he be of soul who could pass by a sight so touching in its majesty.

(41) is in this situation ironically intended, but to succeed it has to be recognised as a quotation, and not just as implying the opposite of what has been said. The speaker of (41) might want to suggest that had Wordsworth been standing in her place he might have written something very different; she might be drawing attention to the distinctions between the poetic and prosaic visions of London; she might be mocking romantic illusions about great cities; and so on.

Ironic interjections are of the same grammatical type as my example from a previous chapter:

(42) Oh, the smell of bread baking!

Such interjections can be used ironically. In Canada, the first bank holiday of the summer, May 24th, commemorates the birthday of Queen Victoria. Traditionally it marks the onset of summer and many people go to the country. Imagine that Peter has invited Mary camping for a pleasant weekend outdoors, telling her it's the best way to celebrate the glorious twenty-fourth of May. A late snowstorm hits the camp and they have to drive back in atrocious conditions. In the car, Mary turns to Peter and says:

(43) Ah, the glorious 24th!

(43) poses two major problems for the traditional definition of irony. Since (43) does not express a complete proposition it cannot be true or false, and cannot therefore be a deviation from a norm of literal truthfulness. As well, it would be hard to decide what the opposite of "Ah, the glorious 24th!" might be.

In all three cases I have mentioned, the traditional definition of irony is inadequate. It may fail to explain why (41) is ironic; it excludes (43) altogether; and, if we do accept (43) as ironic, it cannot tell us why (42) is not. There are also many instances which according

to this definition ought to be ironic, but which are not. Taking an example from Grice (Wilson and Sperber 1992: 56; Grice 1978: 124), let's say two people walk past a car with a broken window. Mary turns to Peter and says

(44) Look, that car has all its windows intact.

Peter asks Mary what she means; she replies that she wanted to draw Peter's attention, ironically, to the fact that the car has a broken window. Under the traditional definition of irony, we should accept (44) as an ironic deviation from the norm of literal truthfulness, intended to communicate

(45) That car has one of its windows broken.

Yet we do not, under the circumstances described, conclude that (45) is ironic. Not only do the traditional definitions of irony fail to include all cases of irony, they cannot exclude cases that are clearly not ironic at all. It's in response to these problems that Wilson and Sperber have developed their approach. They claim that irony is "a variety of echoic interpretive use, in which the communicator dissociates herself from the opinion echoed with accompanying ridicule or scorn" (Wilson and Sperber 1992: 75-76).

The key to this echoic use is the notion of interpretive resemblance. We noticed in the discussion of repetition that the linguistic system will pick up matching forms, and that these forms may go beyond particular units or items realised in speech: they may be syntactic forms, for example. I would like to extend this notion; as in repetition the language faculty picks up matching forms, we may inferentially pick up forms that do not *match* one another but *resemble* each other in some way.

The essence of resemblance is, of course, shared qualities, and the more qualities shared the greater the resemblance will be. In those cases where all qualities are shared, we have not merely resemblance but identity. Thus, identity (identical repetition, for example) is just a special case of resemblance.

As the previous discussion pointed out, there are many varieties of resemblance in language use, and many of them are intended to have no effects whatever (the case of incidental repetition is one variety). Recall too that repetition may involve not just forms but semantic and propositional content. A speaker may use a proposition that resembles another proposition; she may do this for a number of purposes. Let's look at a couple of examples.

(46) Peter: What did Susan say?

(47a) Mary: I can't speak to you now.

(47b) Mary: "I can't speak to you now."

(47c) Mary: She couldn't speak to me then.

Now, (47a) answers Peter's question by telling him that Mary cannot answer him now: "I" refers to Mary, and "you" to Peter. Mary's answer provides no information about what Susan said. (47b), on the other hand, reproduces Susan's exact words. Mary has answered Peter's question by producing an utterance that shares practically all the linguistic properties of the original. (47c), on the other hand, is ambiguous. It may indirectly report the contents of (47b), or explain why Susan did not speak. In the first case, it is an example of reported speech or thought; in the second, it is not.

It's clear that in some intuitive sense (47b) is an echo, and that (47c), on the reported speech interpretation, is also echoic. In both cases, the echo is produced for the purpose of informing the audience (here, Peter) of the properties of the original - that is, what Susan said. But suppose that Susan produced her utterance "I can't speak to you now" in circumstances that made it apparent to Mary that Susan was perfectly able to respond but chose not to. In that case, Mary, feeling disgusted with Susan's actions and wanting to express both what Susan said and her own attitude toward this brush-off, may produce either of the following, say in a tone of voice manifestly copying and exaggerating Susan's characteristic tones:

(48a) Mary: (mockingly) "I can't speak to you now."

(48b) Mary: (mockingly) She couldn't speak to me then.

Sperber and Wilson (1986a: Chapter 4, sections 7 and 8) reserve the term "echoic" for utterances that express the speaker's attitude to an attributed thought. The echo then has two purposes: to remind the audience of the original thought, and to express the speaker's attitude toward it. The expression of attitude is the crucial element here. It need not be ironic; there may be many occasions in which the speaker endorses the thought she is echoing. Let's return for a moment to Peter and Mary's disastrous camping trip. If the weather had been sunny and warm, and the weekend enjoyable, then Mary's producing (43) would have an entirely different purpose; she would have expressed her agreement with Peter and affirmed the wide range of implications that (43) makes manifest.

According to Sperber and Wilson, irony involves the echoing of attributed thoughts for the purpose of dissociating the speaker from the content of those thoughts. It may involve identical reproduction, it may involve summary or elaboration. It is often combined with

caricature, where the content of the original is distorted or exaggerated to bring out its ridiculous nature. It may also spell out some of the implications of the original, implications that the original speaker would not have dared to voice. The range of dissociative attitudes is also broad, including anything from mild mockery to savage scorn. The grounds for dissociation are more varied than on traditional accounts of irony: a speaker may dissociate himself from an attributed opinion not because it is false, but because it is inadequate to the facts (as in ironical understatement), inopportunely expressed, and so on.

Little Dorrit provides many cases of ironical echoing, especially in the scenes involving Miss Wade, Henry Gowan, and Gowan's mother. At one point, for example, the Meagles' maid Tattycoram has run away. Meagles and Clennam trace her to Wade's; before Tattycoram is summoned into the room they appeal for her return:

(49) "... [A]llow me to make known to you that I shall be happy to have her back, and that my wife and daughter will be happy to have her back. She has been with us a long time, we don't forget her claims on us, and I hope we know how to make allowances."
... Arthur Clennam interposed ... "[Allowances] for the passionate sense that sometimes comes upon the poor girl, of being at a disadvantage. Which sometimes gets the better of better remembrances." (275)

Wade calls the girl into the room and repeats the men's plea:

(50) ..."Here is your patron, your master. He is willing to take you back, my dear, if you are sensible of the favour and choose to go. You can be, again, a foil to his pretty daughter, a slave to her pleasant wilfulness, and a toy in the house showing the goodness of the family. You can have your droll name again, playfully pointing you out and setting you apart, as it is right that you should be pointed out and set apart. (Your birth, you know; you must not forget your birth.) You can again be shown to this gentleman's daughter, Harriet, and kept before her, as a living reminder of her own superiority and her gracious condescension. You can recover all these advantages, and many more of the same kind which I dare say start up in your memory while I speak, and which you lose in taking refuge with me - you can recover them all, by telling these gentlemen how humbled and penitent you are, and by going back with them to be forgiven." (276)

Dickens' achievement in this speech is that Wade keeps quite close to what was originally said, but brings out what she takes to be its (unintended) implications - all of which are in fact quite accurately represented. Meagles himself suffers "inexpressible consternation in hearing his motives and actions so perverted" (276).

In irony, the ironic speaker produces an utterance that has an interpretive resemblance

to what was said or thought. When we can identify the original speaker whose utterance is being echoed, recognising irony may seem a relatively straightforward matter. Often, though, when people ostensibly agree with what we (or someone else) have just said - by effectively echoing it - we may nevertheless suspect an element of irony. We have no difficulty seeing whose opinion is being echoed; we still have to recognise the intended attitude, however, to make a decision about the intended interpretation.

At least we can see that something is being echoed, and we may be able to see that the ironic speaker does not endorse the proposition originally expressed; instead, she expresses ridicule in any degree from mild exasperation to fierce contempt. However, many instances of irony do not echo any identifiable original utterance. What then is being echoed?

Many echoic utterances - whether ironic or not - have no specific utterances as originals. When someone echoes folk wisdom, say, or sums up a general attitude, she is echoing the sentiments of a group of people that may never have been expressed in a single proposition, or in just that form, before. Wilson and Sperber (1992: 60) comment:

> The thought being echoed may not have been expressed as an utterance; it may not be attributable to any specific person, but merely to a type of person, or people in general; it may be merely a cultural aspiration or norm.

Often this can be combined with caricature. Consider this example from *Huckleberry Finn*, one of the few intentionally ironic utterances in the book that can be attributed to a particular speaker. A colonel named Sherburn has shot and killed a drunkard for insulting him in the street, and now faces a lynch mob that has come to his home. He says:

(51) "Because you're brave enough to tar and feather poor friendless cast-out women that come along here, did that make you think you had grit enough to lay your hands on a *man*?" (209)

Presumably no one in the crowd would assert that assaulting "fallen women" made him brave; yet Sherburn's words are ironic. No actual utterance is being echoed. What is going on?

This case doesn't *reproduce* either an actual utterance *or* an actual thought. If we consider that an utterance may echo thoughts that are attributed to a speaker, or group, then these thoughts may be caricatured to bring out their implications. The Twain example is therefore similar to (49) and (50), except that attributed thoughts rather than attributed speech are involved. In (51), Sherburn is caricaturing the original thought, "we are brave people", pointing out that assaulting weak, helpless, classless people is a sign of cowardice rather than

bravery. He knows that his audience consider themselves brave people; by echoing this sentiment in this way, he strongly implicates that they are actually cowards, that their claims of bravery are delusive, that they are self-deceived, because they will not recognise the discrepancy between their claims about themselves and their actions. In particular, the discrepancy between their self-image and the truth as brought out in the echoic utterance shows that this echoic utterance is intended to express some attitude toward the original thought ("We are brave people"). In this type of bitter irony, the object of ironic attack is rarely an individual, but the cultural and social attitudes and norms that support patently false self-images or reprehensible behaviour. As we shall see, the target of Twain's irony throughout *Huckleberry Finn* is often precisely these cultural and social norms.

So irony is a variety of echoic utterance. There may not be an identifiable original speaker or utterance, but there must be an original thought or type of thought that is being echoed. Its purpose, as in all echoic utterances, is to express an attitude toward what was said or thought. In irony, the speaker implicitly dissociates herself from the thought she echoes; she rejects it, in fact, with ridicule and scorn. This account helps us understand why we react so poorly to being the objects of irony (or satire,[48] or parody), for it combines mockery with rejection and is essentially belittling or diminishing.

In each case that I have dealt with so far, there has always been an ironic speaker, whether a real one or a character in a novel. Twain's novel, though, provides an interesting case. It is deeply and thoroughly ironic, but that irony is often missed or misunderstood, because it is not put into the mouth of a character, nor expressed by the narrator. I shall use *Huckleberry Finn* to discuss this sort of case.

8. Irony in prose: Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*

Twain's novel is simple enough to describe: in the back woods of Missouri around 1840, an uneducated boy, about thirteen or fourteen years old, runs away from the civilising influences of his guardians and the terror of his drunken father; he encounters Jim, a runaway slave. The two find a raft and float down the Mississippi river. On the way they undergo

[48] B Kliban captured the notion of satire in appropriately scatological terms in a cartoon in which one man produces a heap of excrement that accurately depicts another. While other figures in the cartoon are pointing at both and laughing, a tear falls from the eye of the man being lampooned.

various adventures and meet a variety of people who are representative of their society; ultimately, they are discovered and captured. By the novel's end, Jim has been freed by his former owner, and Huck resolves to run away again.

This simplicity is deceptive; the novel, though episodic, is seductively well-written and raises complex issues. It has also provoked controversy, from its initial publication in 1885 to the present day. In particular, it has always been the subject of censorship debates centring on Twain's use of language and its influence on young people. Twain's contemporaries feared it would promote the use of coarse language and poor grammar, and that it would encourage boys to misbehave and defy authority. Today campaigners object to the characters' free use of racist terms; they fear that the nostalgic view of a slave-holding society will promote racist attitudes in young people and inflame racial issues.

The only effective defense against the charge of racism (though not, I'm afraid, against charges of coarse language) is to demonstrate that the novel is intentionally ironic. The heart of the censors' argument is that Twain implicitly endorsed the attitudes and language use of his characters. If the novel is ironic, however, then the opposite must be the case: Mark Twain would then have produced a work that implicitly rejects these attitudes with ridicule and scorn. To argue that the novel is ironic in the echoic account, though, we would need to show that there is an ironic speaker. And that presents a problem which is the key to the general misunderstandings about the text.

Readers' reactions to *Huckleberry Finn* fall into three main categories. First there are those who claim that the novel is racist, and that its humour (such as it is) is accidental. Then there are those who assert that the novel is an ironic attack on the attitudes that produce and support racist attitudes and other immoral behaviour. These readers, usually those aiming at a spontaneous interpretation of the novel, cannot however *argue* their case: they can only say they "know" what Twain intended. There is potentially a third group of readers: those aiming at a literary interpretation of the novel. These readers ought to be able to demonstrate the ironic attitude and so argue that Twain intended a specifically anti-racist stance.

Why are there these three main groups? Clearly it is because the first have missed the irony altogether; the second have recognised it unconsciously, without being able to say how; and the third, by aiming at a literary interpretation, have attempted consciously to recognise all "foregrounding", including "foregrounded" attitudes. In relevance terms, we would then say that, if indeed the novel is ironic, the first group have produced an unsuccessful

interpretation; and that the other two have produced the two main varieties of successful interpretation. It is important to see that the first group have actually failed in their interpretive efforts, for they have failed to recognise what the writer intended them to recognise: the ironic effect. If we define successful interpretation as the recognition of the writer's intention - as we do in a relevance-theoretic framework - then readers who fail to pick up the irony have failed to interpret the novel successfully.

But that means I must show that the novel actually *is* ironic, and that Twain does not endorse the attitudes and actions of his characters. And here we run into a problem: there seems to be no ironic speaker, in which case it might seem that there can be no irony. In fact, although we have a handful of ironic speakers in the novel (such as Sherburn), they are always very minor characters; and the ironic speeches produced by others are occasional rather than characteristic. We might expect, then, that there will be a character whose speeches are not ironic, but which express the anti-racist attitudes I claim Twain is implicating. But here, too, we have a difficulty: *every single character in the novel accepts and supports, tacitly or actively, the institution of slavery.* Even Jim, the runaway slave, never opposes the institution of slavery; he has run away not in a bid for freedom as such, but to avoid being sold down the river. No character, black or white, slave or free, comes close to questioning slavery; every character, good or bad, moral or criminal, sympathetic or repulsive, accepts slavery and slave-holding not just as normal but as a positive good.

We might then wonder if the narrator can be considered an ironic speaker. Where a narrator is not a character in the novel (as is the case in *Little Dorrit*, for example, or in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*), he may attribute the thoughts to the characters while implicitly rejecting them with ridicule and scorn (as is the case with passages of *Little Dorrit*). But even this avenue is blocked: Huckleberry Finn is the first person narrator of his own story, and he is, despite his bouts with his conscience, entirely representative of these social attitudes.[49] Any attempt to characterise the novel as ironic then would seem futile, since there is no ironic speaker. This is of course a problem not just for relevance theory, but for the traditional analysis of irony as saying one thing and meaning the opposite.

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[49] In fact, most students who believe that the novel is not racist will insist that Huck comes to understand that slavery is wrong and that he helps Jim as a matter of principle. So determined are they to fabricate evidence to support their intuitions that they must be forced to examine the novel carefully to see that this is patently untrue. At no point does Huck even question, let alone condemn slavery; and his decision to help Jim, which he sincerely believes will send him to hell, is taken out of loyalty to a friend, and that alone.

In fact, I would argue that Twain's choice of Huck as narrator is the strongest evidence for the ironic status of the novel. Consider that most interpretations of the novel, even those that miss its irony, concede its humour (though they may differ as to whether or not it was intentional). Yet Huck Finn himself has no sense of humour at all. It's not that he rarely laughs (one critic pointed out that his usual mood is "miserableness"), but that he does not perceive or create humour himself; he is unrelentingly in earnest. Yet many of his descriptions, of his own feelings and of the situations around him, are undeniably funny. Consider a few examples:

(52) Now [Miss Watson] had got a start, and she went on and told me all about the good place. She said all a body would have to do there was to go around all day with a harp and sing for ever and ever. So I didn't think much of it. But I never said so. I asked her if she reckoned Tom Sawyer would go there, and she said, not by a considerable sight. I was glad about that, because I wanted him and me to be together. (51)

(53) [The judge] said he reckoned a body could reform the old man [Huck's Pap] with a shot-gun, maybe, but he didn't know no other way. (73)

(54) And the minute the words was out of his mouth somebody over in the crowd struck up the doxologer, and everybody joined in with all their might, and it just warmed you up and made you feel as good as church letting out. (228)

(55) This is what [Emmeline Grangerford] wrote about a boy by the name of Stephen Dowling Bots that fell down a well and was drownded: [I include only the last verse, but the whole poem runs pretty much in this vein]

> They got him out and emptied him;
> Alas it was too late;
> His spirit was gone for to sport aloft
> In the realms of the good and great.

If Emmeline Grangerford could make poetry like that before she was fourteen, there ain't no telling what she could a done by and by. (161-162)

We might be tempted to call any of Huck's remarks "dead-pan", but this would imply that Huck is determined not to laugh at his own jokes. The fact is that Huck is not aware that any of his utterances might be funny: he is merely passing on his observations, whether they are of other people's behaviour (54) or of his own (admiring) responses to it (55). Not once does Huck make a joke, though he does pull a crude practical joke on Jim (72-74). Huck, for all his good-nature, lacks the critical distance needed for even a mild sense of humour.

There is something else we should notice about Huck, and it's connected with his function as narrator. I want to discuss this before continuing the argument.

The narrator has a single necessary function: to provide information for the reader, information that will act as evidence for the writer's intentions. Usually the narrator is the sole source of information in a narrative. The narrator's character, situation and relation to the characters and events of the narrative will determine the quantity and quality of information the reader receives. In every successful narrative (that is, every narrative that enables the audience to recognise the effects the writer intended) the quantity and quality of information will provide sufficient evidence for the thoughts the writer intended to convey. In each case, however, these two characteristics will vary.

We can think of the quantity and quality of information as being affected by its source, its completeness and its trustworthiness. A narrator who witnesses a scene will presumably be a better source of information about it, providing many accurate details, than one who has heard of it at third- or fourth-hand. A narrator who is observant and articulate will presumably provide even more accuracy; she may in addition contribute her own comments and insights which will aid the reader's understanding of the people and events of the novel. A narrator who is honest and straightforward with the reader will presumably provide reports which the reader accepts with a minimum of adjustment. In every case, the situation and character of the narrator (from first-person to the absent omniscient third person) will affect the nature and status of the information, the evidence, that the reader has to work with.

Now observe the kind of information Huck makes available to his audience. As the first-person narrator of his own story, he is of course on the spot for every significant event (with two crucial exceptions, vital to the continuation of the plot).[50] An inveterate liar with everyone else, he is always truthful with himself. And his observations of people and events are remarkable not just for their accuracy[51] but for their insight. We note that while adults of more sophistication than Huck are taken in by the Duke and the King, "it didn't take me

[50] He does not know that his father is dead, and he does not know that Jim has been freed by Miss Watson in her will. In both instances, the vital information is deliberately withheld from Huck, who has no direct access to it.

[51] He reproduces the seven dialects which Twain names in his explanatory note, and which he himself says "have not been done in a haphazard fashion, or by guess-work; but painstakingly". (48)

[Huck] long to make up my mind that these liars warn't no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds" (185-186). Huck is in fact a perfect narrator for Twain's purposes (whatever they may be); he allows Twain not just to provide an accurate and comprehensive picture of Mississippi life, but to give insights into character without seeming to impose the writer's own views on his readers.

But Huck is not just perfect: he is impossible. We are so seduced by his innocent charm that we fail to notice the contradictions in his character. Here is a boy who, until the Widow and Miss Watson began to civilise him, was illiterate, superstitious and ignorant. Indeed, the only change in his condition initially is that he learns to read tolerably well. Yet he has a sophistication about and understanding of people that is approached by no other character in the novel, no matter how well-educated or penetrating he may be. Again, he has been raised by a father who is the essence of brutishness; yet his experiences have not diminished but enhanced his good nature. Huck believes that the stars have been laid by the moon (179), yet reads "considerable" in *Pilgrim's Progress* and finds its statements "interesting, but tough" (159). Finally, he is observant beyond anything we could expect of a thirteen- or fourteen-year-old of his background in his situation. Any of Huck's descriptions, particularly of the river and the bank-dwellers, will support this claim.

Clearly Huck is not meant to be a realistic character in the loose sense. Yet we accept his contradictions without noticing them, and are disarmed by his naivete. There may be several effects that follow from having this kind of narrator.

The first is the effect he has on the information he provides, as I have noted. Second, his qualities mean that he is the inferior (intellectually, socially, culturally) of the audience Twain assumes will read his story. As well, although Huck undergoes or witnesses one appalling, tragic spectacle after another, he forgets each one as soon as he leaves it behind: no event, no matter how horrifying, is ever referred to after the incident is closed. This curious amnesia, combined with the subtle sense of superiority the reader may feel over Huck, means that we accept what Huck tells without questioning it; and as importantly, dwell on the nostalgic aspects of the novel while we ignore the more gruesome parts.

Now we are in a position to see how Huck can be the key to an ironic effect. Notice that because we have a completely trustworthy, faithful narrator to whom we feel superior, we accept everything he tells us without question. Those few times when Huck provides patently false information we perceive its falseness immediately and are not misled by his

naivete (the circus incident, when Huck is taken in by the cheap grandeur of the performers, is one such case). This means that we also trust his insights into people; and that when we are presented with conflicting information we will not resolve the problem by assuming that the narrator has made a mistake.

Let's recall the exchange I mentioned in a previous chapter, between Huck and Aunt Sally:

(56) "...What's kep' you! - boat get aground?"

..."It warn't the grounding - that didn't keep us back but a little. We blowed out a cylinder-head."

"Good gracious! anybody hurt?"

"No'm. Killed a nigger."

"Well, it's lucky, because sometimes people do get hurt." (291)

What's interesting about this exchange is that we can trust Huck's version of it completely: that is, we know that Huck is reporting it without bias or reinterpretation. Since the propositions expressed lead to a conclusion that we know to be false ("Black Americans are `niggers' and `niggers' are not people"), we perceive a discrepancy between the way the characters see the world and the way it is presented to us in the novel (Jim is clearly presented as a person, a full human being; Huck apologises to him when he has offended him, and listens to Jim's regrets about striking his daughter). This discrepancy is central to the ironic effect.

Huck's impossibly perfect character, as human being and as narrator, means that he provides us with information about the world of the novel, and about the way the characters of the novel perceive that world. There are contradictions between these two kinds of information at many points in the novel. Twain uses Huck to echo the words and attitudes of the characters of the novel while simultaneously providing information that makes manifest that these propositions and attitudes are not warranted, are indeed contradicted, by the reality of the world they inhabit. Since the fictional world so closely resembles our own, we are entitled to assume that it is intended to represent our world. Furthermore, this world is not just a representation of a specific historical period, but represents humanity in a more general sense. Consequently we may see whatever criticisms we make of the characters (based on the information Twain has made available to us through his narrator) as applying to human beings of any period - including our own.

So we can see that this idea of irony is a two-stage one:

(57a) A lot of things in a novel are used by the writer to represent (by resemblance) real people, events, habits, fashions in talk, thoughts, and so on. All of them can be tacitly held up to ridicule. The usual result is, broadly, satire.

(57b) As a special case of (57a), the speech and thought of characters in a novel may be used to echo the sorts of things that real (types of) people think and say. When the writer tacitly holds these up to ridicule, we get a variety of irony: the writer (via his characters) echoes, and (in his own right) dissociates himself from, the sort of opinions expressed in the work.

Now, an attitude of ridicule or mockery of something doesn't always lead to irony. But when the attitude is to an echoed opinion, then irony *is* involved. It's along these lines that we can make the case that *Huckleberry Finn* is an ironic novel, and that Twain did not wish to propagate or support racist attitudes. Instead, as I have argued, he intended to criticise the thoughts and attitudes of his characters, and to lead us to recognise this intention, and perhaps to make criticisms of our own.

What criticisms do we tend to make? Most readers find the characters of the novel self-deceived and ready prey for the deceptions of others, no matter how thin these deceptions may be. The characters cherish false self-images (that they are "brave people" and good "Christians") that justify their reprehensible behaviour. Most damning of all, their stubbornly-held romantic view of themselves as chivalrous Christian knights permits a grotesque social evil - slavery - to take such root that even highly moral people (such as the Widow) do not question it.

Now we have two conclusions we may draw: either Twain intended us to make these criticisms, or he did not. If he did not, then he has spent a considerable amount of time creating a character - Huck Finn - who inevitably makes manifest the assumptions that will lead the reader to these conclusions. He has provided information that, whatever its other purposes, makes strongly manifest the discrepancy between the reality of Huck's world and the fantasies its characters entertain about it. The novel also makes these assumptions manifest in a way that exposes the characters and their fantasies to ridicule and scorn while we reject their attitudes and cultural norms - the very definition of the ironic effect. In short, to believe that Twain did not intend this novel to be ironic is to accuse him of being at once a very good and a very bad writer: that is, one who knew exactly what he was doing in every

area but this. Instead of this, I would suggest that the ironic speaker of this novel is the writer himself: that is, Twain is not endorsing the thoughts and attitudes expressed by his characters.

So we have a choice, not just based on intuition, but on the available evidence, which goes far beyond what we might originally have thought. What does relevance theory say about this situation?

In a relevance-theoretic framework, the censors' view of the novel is entirely possible. A writer may make exactly the kind of egregious error that Twain would have had to make. It is possible that a writer may waste her time creating a narrator, like Huck Finn, who makes fairly strongly manifest a set of assumptions directly contrary to her intended implications. A rational writer might make the mistake of producing a work whose implications are quite opposite to the implicatures she intended.[52] The writer might be rational, but she would also be a very poor communicator. What is less possible, what is in fact ruled out by the principle of relevance, is that a rational writer would deliberately put her reader to the effort of achieving effects that were antithetical to those she intended. Such a writer would not in fact be communicating at all, but would be deliberately wasting her reader's time for purposes of her own.

If we grant that Twain is a rational writer and that the novel is genuine communication, then we can admit the censors' claims only by arguing that Twain could not have foreseen that his readers could achieve ironic effects. Again, this argument will not hold, since if that were true we would expect the irony to be sporadic, and probably unrelated to the central intentions of the novel.

But even Twain's critics concede that although *Huckleberry Finn* is a nostalgic recreation of Twain's boyhood in Missouri, its central intentions are highly critical of Southern society and culture, and indeed of the characteristic attitudes of the United States in general. Most readers of the novel, both casual and those aiming at a literary interpretation, assume that his intentions are critical rather than supportive of Southern culture. No matter how we approach the novel, then, we can argue with a good deal of evidence, and from relevance theory, that the irony is thematic and intentional.

This, I believe, is the only literary reply we can made to charges of racism in this

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[52] Twain's essay "A Cure for the Blues" analyses a case very similar to the one I have described here. The writer, "McClintock" (Twain gave him an alias), has written a serious romance which produces effects very different from those he manifestly intended.

novel. *Huckleberry Finn* may of course be defended from such an indictment on other grounds; but my argument is entirely based on the text itself, using internal evidence in a relevance-theoretic approach and treating irony as a form of echoic utterance. Some readers may miss the irony, but this is the result of misunderstanding on the reader's part rather than the absence of intention on the writer's. Relevance theory does not predict that misunderstandings will not occur, but provides a principled basis on which to account for them, and on which to argue for alternate readings.

9. Conclusion

As we can see, it is only when the attitude of irony is consciously recognised - as a result of being "foregrounded" -that the reader can argue that *Huckleberry Finn* attacks rather than endorses racist actions and attitudes. Our examination of the novel has allowed us to test both the echoic theory of irony and its application to a new type of case. Furthermore, I have argued for a particular interpretation of the novel based on the irony I perceive in it, supporting my claims by appeal to relevance theory in general, and the echoic account of irony in particular.

We can see then that relevance theory may have wider applications than might have first appeared to be the case. I have criticised the concept of "foregrounding" and redefined it, and applied a relevance-theoretic approach to two common and important literary strategies traditionally analysed in terms of it, repetition and irony. They are not so unrelated as the traditional definitions suggest; in fact, by treating irony as a variety of echoic utterance we may even see a point of contact between them. Where in repetition matching forms are picked up by the language faculty, in irony an interpretive resemblance is picked up inferentially in the process of interpretation.

I have also tried to show that "foregrounding" only occurs when the writer intends the effort required to process the "foregrounded" elements to result in some set of intended effects. I have argued that we would be better to think of foregrounding as a description of an impression received when the writer has intentionally made an element of the text salient so that the reader will achieve extra effects for the extended effort required to process it. On this basis I distinguished between "foregrounded" repetition and incidental or accidental repetition; I also looked at a variety of cases and showed that while we might call each one

"foregrounded", the effects differed from case to case.

We can account for the presence and effects of "foregrounding" in terms of salience and intentionality in a relevance-theoretic framework. In fact, it is on this basis that I argued against the view that the humour and irony in *Huckleberry Finn* were accidental or incidental. If that were the case, then the effects could not properly be called ironic; it is not clear that we can talk of incidental or accidental irony, as we talk of incidental or accidental repetition, say. Accidental mockery does not make much sense.

But there are still other implications resulting from applying relevance theory to literature and literary interpretations. Rather than being just another theory of reading, or even of communication, it can add substantially to long-standing literary debates and help clarify important literary issues.

It is to this application of relevance theory that I want now to turn. In the next chapter I will first look in more detail at the distinction between kinds of interpretation that I touched on briefly in this chapter. I will then propose two broad categories of interpretation. These categories are not new: in fact, they are quite traditional; but they haven't been distinguished in a consistent and principled way before. The arguments will lead inevitably to consideration of some fundamental issues in literature. Specifically, I want to see what relevance theory can add to our understanding of literariness (and not just literary interpretations). I want to see if it clarifies the characteristics of a classic. And I will examine what contributions the application of relevance theory to these two issues can make to arguments about the canon.

These are broad theoretical and literary issues, and I hardly propose to settle them here. But I do want to show that relevance theory may have something of importance to add to these debates, though it may not resolve them.

Chapter Four: Literariness, interpretation and the canon

> Our present-day Minority Public is not a half, probably only a tenth, of the Eighteenth Century Public. It is the Public of the Intelligentsia. Although much smaller, this Public of the Intelligentsia might be expected to compare favourably with the Public of the aristocratic era. That is, however, not the case. It is too specialised: an unrepresentative fraction of the whole. And it *is* the whole, in some form or other, that is required by a writer. Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment* (1950, 1984: 18)

> ...one prose writer of the [nineteenth] century stands a secure and supreme artist. ... In the economy of his effect [Lytton Strachey] is with Swift, and to be with Swift is to be with one of the best things that English prose in its long tradition of over a thousand years has produced. Ifor Evans, *A Short History of English Literature* (1940: 227)

1. Kinds of interpretation

In the previous three chapters I have developed some of the central ideas of relevance theory and begun to explore its applications to the discussion of literary works. We've seen that relevance theory, though based on relatively simple assumptions about human cognition, has quite complex applications and implications in the domain of communication in general, and literary communication in particular. Its ideas about strong and weak communication and implicatures are especially pertinent because they suggest an interesting new account of what I am calling "poetic effects" and which (under a variety of names) are for many people the essence of literariness. I have tried to show that we can explain these effects in terms of the assumption that communication is intended to alter cognitive environments. A writer may intend her work to make a very wide range of minute alterations in her reader's cognitive environment. To spell out these alterations explicitly would distort her intentions by making some of them too salient, thus reducing the need to search for adequate relevance by exploring the whole range.

These points do not directly answer the question that lies at the heart of this thesis, which is what constitutes literary interpretation. Yet they are indispensable to an understanding of literary interpretation, because they show how vague communication can be dealt with,

how it is not unique to literary interpretation, and how the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance can be seen as operating in literary interpretation as well as in spontaneous comprehension.

So it has been necessary to do this groundwork before coming back to the question that began this enquiry: what is literary interpretation? In my review of the literature on this topic, I covered some of the main theoretical and critical ideas about literary interpretation, and noted the frustration many critics experience trying to formulate either good descriptions or adequate analyses of literary interpretation. As a result of this frustration, the tendency over the last few years has been to assume that no such *thing* as a literary interpretation exists: that literary interpretation is a *process* which can be applied to any work. Some argue that literary interpretation is the process by which a text *becomes* (or is recognised as) literary.

If the claims I have been making are correct, then this view of literary interpretation is wrong. Literary and spontaneous interpretations are different, not because they involve different cognitive processes, but because they have different aims. I have already touched on some of the arguments for this view in my discussion of natural and literary processing (Chapter 3, section 5). I want now to develop these ideas. First, however, I want to look more closely at our general intuitions about literary interpretation, and at how we can fit them into the framework I have been outlining here.

As I've noted in Chapter 1 (sections 2, 3, and 4), most people who read extensively, or who have had any exposure to literary criticism, would say that a literary interpretation is somehow different from the spontaneous interpretation of the ordinary reader. Typically, the ordinary reader doesn't bother to make sense of every bit of evidence the work provides. He may also have skipped the "hard bits", rather than trying to puzzle them out, and he is less likely to worry about whether the inevitable internal contradictions in his own interpretation have been resolved. The result my be something very partial and fragmentary.

By contrast, the reader who produces a literary interpretation is aiming for something that is *exhaustive*, *plausible* and *unified.* He is willing to invest the extra effort needed to make sense of all the evidence the work makes available to him. He will likely pay closer attention to those parts of the work that are difficult, and research the possible discrepancies in language and context between him and the writer. He must also resolve any contradictions that appear in his interpretation; and this interpretation must account for apparent

contradictions in the text. Furthermore, the reader aiming at a literary interpretation must identify what I have loosely called the central set of assumptions, or the central "bit" of information, that is part of the intended message that the writer intended him to use and re-use as part of the intended context and (or) contextual effects. I have argued that all these intuitive ideas about the nature of literary interpretation can be clarified using the theoretical machinery of relevance theory.

Let us first see how a particular case might shed light on the differences between literary and spontaneous interpretations in general and intuitive terms. Imagine two people reading *Middlemarch*. The first has heard that the novel has been made into a BBC series, and wants to have read it before he sees the television adaptation. He knows from previous experience that a great deal is left out in adaptations; whole subplots may be eradicated, characters merged or dropped, and in some cases the ending is changed.[53] His main concern is to keep the characters and events straight; if he becomes caught up in the storyline, he may be curious to find out how Dorothea will sidestep the terms of Casaubon's will, whether Lydgate's marriage will survive, and how Mary and Fred will get on. The symmetry of the plot lines may not occur to him; the connection between the political and the personal events need not concern him; and Eliot's naturalistic depiction of various social classes may be something he takes for granted. His interpretation will be a hypothesis about the intended context, content, attitudes and contextual effects; but it may not go much beyond plotting the storyline, seeing which characters Eliot intended to make sympathetic or unsympathetic, perhaps finding some grain of compassion for Casaubon, and maybe concluding, more generally, that even obscure lives led in a quiet country village have unforeseen and possibly important effects.

That would be a possible, and rather common, line of spontaneous interpretation. The second reader, aiming at a literary interpretation, should pay attention precisely to the relationships between plot lines which follow various marriages and the consequent movement of property. He should explore the connection between the political partisanship inflamed by the Reform Act of 1832 and the slight, profound shifts in social relations in the village. He should examine the means by which Eliot produces a socially naturalistic portrait

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[53] The film version of *Little Dorrit* condensed the novel to fit the major events and characters into six hours' viewing time; and the David Lean screen version of Dickens' *Great Expectations* notoriously provided an ending different from either ending Dickens originally published (or may have intended).

of the lives led by a representative segment of the English population. The literary interpretation will go beyond recording the reader's actual reactions to Ladislaw and Lydgate, Casaubon and Cadwallader; he will take care to recognise the writer's intentions about these characters, and develop complex understandings of them and their function in the novel. Eliot's explicit comparison between Dorothea and St Teresa may provoke a whole line of interpretation which might throw up contradictory assumptions, since the two women are very unlike in many ways. A literary (and well-read) reader may, in his exploration of the intended context, access the relevant lines from the fourteenth and fifteenth stanzas of Gray's *Elegy*; these lines may seem an appropriate summary of Dorothea's (and Lydgate's and others') situation. Nevertheless, he will feel that something more than a mere restatement of these lines is intended and should be developed.[54] What warrants the literary reader's conviction on this last point has already been partly discussed in the sections on "foregrounding". I will have more to say on the distinction between personal significance (or actual relevance) and intended significance (intended relevance) later in this chapter (sections 2, 3, 4, and 5). Here I am mainly concerned with spontaneous interpretation which is geared, crucially, to recognition of the writer's intentions as to explicit content, attitudes, implications and so on.

Recall my argument that "foregrounding" can be understood in terms of salience and intentionality: "foregrounded" elements are those which the writer intended should produce extra effects. The degree to which the reader becomes aware of the salient elements will affect the degree of effort which he is willing to invest in interpretation; but I have argued that some elements, only weakly "foregrounded", will be dealt with automatically in the process of interpretation, and so will produce a relatively narrow range of weak effects. I also argued that when a reader is aiming at a literary interpretation, he ought to pay attention precisely to those elements of the text which he has reason to believe have been "foreground-

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[54] The lines of the second stanza, even more than those of the first, produce a wide range of effects if made part of the context in which the novel is processed. We can see Dorothea as the "gem" and "flower" in her role as a Teresa lacking the material and social conditions in which her talents could influence a larger circle; we can also see Lydgate as an ironic case: while the material and social conditions permit him to develop his talents as a healer, his personal situation means that his abilities, too, go to waste. We may see even Casaubon's case in this light: his futile scholarship and desiccated emotional state allow us to see him as a perversion of the "mute inglorious Milton" of the poem. Not only do the characters languish in the corner of the world fate has assigned them; but if we see Middlemarch as a microcosm we can see unfulfilled potential (as in Fred's case) even at this level.

ed": that is, which are intentionally salient. He is aiming to identify the range of assumptions made weakly manifest by such elements. One of the most interesting differences between spontaneous and literary interpretations, then, will be in how each reader deals with intentionally salient elements. The spontaneous reader of *Middlemarch* may not notice a host of assumptions weakly communicated through intentional salience, as my example demonstrates. The literary reader, on the other hand, *must* notice them and incorporate them into a plausible and unified interpretation, a hypothesis about the context, attitudes, and contextual effects the writer intended him to recover.

The two broad kinds of interpretation - literary and spontaneous - are widely recognised, although there is some controversy about where and how (and by whom) the borderline should be drawn. There is also a third kind of interpretation that is quite common, and is usually subsumed under one or the other of these categories, though I want now to argue that it is quite distinct from them. This is the kind of interpretation where the reader's efforts are directed primarily toward discovering personal significance in the work. When a person says that such-and-such a book changed his life, he usually means that he has developed an interpretation in terms which are personally significant. These sorts of interpretations often share many of the features of spontaneous and literary interpretations of a work; but there is an important difference.

When a reader says that a particular work changed his life, he frequently means that after reading and understanding the work he could no longer look at the world in the same way; this change may be relatively minor ("I can't think of Mary Queen of Scots the same way since I read Cronin's *The Citadel*") or quite major ("Because I read Cronin's *The Citadel* I decided to become a doctor"). In my own case, for instance, *Middlemarch* occupies a special place. Although I read it solely for pleasure, reading it taught me what immense artistry and power I could discover in a novel. Reading *Middlemarch* quite literally made accessible to me a world that I had not suspected before, though I had read English literature as an undergraduate. This experience led me ultimately to graduate studies and to teaching. Other readers have reported similar experiences with a range of authors (see for example the *Paris Review* interviews; Plimpton 1967).

Such interpretations are often classed as aesthetic responses.[55] They are that, at least partially in some cases, but there is another and better term for this kind of interpretation, and it is the one I am going to use. *Eisegetical* interpretations are traditionally made of sacred texts; their aim is to discover the significance of the text to a person's life, its effect on his conduct and view of the world. Although I am hardly claiming a similar status for, say, Gaddis' *The Recognitions* and the Bible, I do claim that there are *sufficient* similarities between interpretations of either book that aim at discovering how the work can affect the reader's conduct or understanding of the world. The fact that such interpretations are developed primarily in terms that are personally significant to any one reader at least intuitively justifies classing this type of interpretation apart from the other two (literary and spontaneous). I will return to this notion in section 3.

Clearly, if what I have been claiming about relevance theory is correct, then all these interpretations are formed in more or less the same way, by looking for relevance as described in Chapter 1 and amplified in Chapter 2. Eisegetical interpretations always, or mostly, go beyond what is warranted by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance. They involve *actual* rather than *intended* relevance, and involve looking for the greatest possible effects in return for the smallest possible effort: that is, *maximal* rather than *optimal* relevance. Consequently, we may expect that differences between them will largely be of degree rather than of kind. We may further suspect that the difference between eisegetical and other interpretations will be partly related to the contexts in which the work is processed, and that eisegetical interpretations are taken more on the reader's responsibility than spontaneous or literary interpretations. In any event, we now need to see what light a relevance-theoretic approach can shed on the three kinds of interpretation, and the differences between them.

2. Spontaneous and literary interpretations

I have given a fairly intuitive description of three kinds of interpretation. We should now see how we can describe and explain these distinctions in relevance-theoretic terms. Spontaneous interpretations of literary works are produced very much as spontaneous

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[55] See Adrian Pilkington's argument (in Pilkington 1994).

comprehension is, with the important proviso mentioned above: that the result of spontaneous interpretation may be fragmentary, may ignore much evidence provided by the text, and may even be internally contradictory. Readers aiming at a spontaneous, private interpretation of a literary work may not notice these shortcomings to anything like the same degree that they would in ordinary conversation. This is because the literary text differs from ordinary conversation in the complexity of information that needs to be kept in mind, and consequently, the effort needed to construct an adequate interpretation. A good comparison would be between the spontaneous interpretation of a literary work and an academic monograph, which will again not be fully grasped on first reading, or without further study.

In relevance-theoretic terms, a reader who is constructing a spontaneous interpretation of a literary work may achieve an interpretation that is relevant enough to warrant the effort he is prepared to expend on it; however, this effort may not be enough to achieve an optimally relevant interpretation of the text as a whole. Recall the example I have used in previous chapters, of Dickens' initial description of Flintwinch. As I noted in Chapter 2, the mystery is not how such a precise description could produce effects, but how it could communicate such a rich array of implicatures.

(1) "His head was awry, and he had a one-sided, crab-like way with him, *as if his foundations had yielded at about the same time as the house*, and he ought to have been propped up in a similar manner." (Dickens 1982: 26; italics added)

Now the casual reader faced with this description will find he has to expend a lot of effort in interpreting the passage I have italicised. Like all metaphors, this passage verges on anomaly.[56] The reader will typically construct an image, then interpret that. He can do this because the image opens up a whole range of possibilities. Because this range is so large, and because the assumptions that make it up are made only marginally more manifest by the passage, each of these assumptions is only weakly communicated. Consequently every person who reads the passage will come up with a slightly different range of implicatures. In Chapter 3 I dealt with the implications of this view of communication for the notion of "foregrounding". In both cases, I suggested that one of the important functions of such cases as (1) is to direct the reader to the central set of assumptions the writer intends the reader to

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[56] For a more detailed description of the relevance-theoretic approach to metaphor, see Blakemore (1992), Pilkington (1994, 1992), Sperber and Wilson (1986: 231-237; 1989), Wilson and Sperber 1988b, 1986a, and Wilson (1994).

use as part of the context for a more detailed, rich reading.

What is the difference between literary and spontaneous interpretations of (1)? The casual reader will look for enough effects to justify his efforts. He will take the most immediately accessible context, but he will not search in any systematic way for reverberations with earlier passages, nor explore his encyclopedic knowledge of "foundations slipping" in more than a superficial way. The result may be an isolated fragment that does not interact with other elements of the text; in effect, the reader has not identified the central "bit" of information, nor used it as part of the context in which he is processing (1).

The literary interpretation, unlike the spontaneous interpretation, is geared to picking out the optimally relevant interpretation of the text as a whole. The reader aiming at a literary interpretation may develop his reading of the passage very much in the ways I have indicated in previous discussions. He will produce a reading of the passage that increases the manifestness of a very wide range of contextual assumptions, and so will "cash out" his efforts in that direction, as I argued in Chapter 2; but he will also process (1) in a context containing assumptions about the relationship between characters and their surroundings, say, and arrive at an interpretation along the lines I have described in Chapter 3. Moreover, his interpretation may be criticised by other readers on various grounds. They will evaluate the degree to which it accounts for the information in the passage itself; for the likelihood that Dickens intended the reader to make the connections described; and the degree to which this interpretation "fits" with the interpretation of other passages, and the novel as a whole. This process of evaluation fits in with what I claimed about the literary interpretation: that its goals could be described as exhaustiveness, plausibility, and unity. Let's re-examine these goals in relevance-theoretic terms.

In relevance-theoretic terms, *exhaustiveness* involves making sure that all elements of the text are used, and that no gratuitous effort is demanded of the reader (see clause b of the definition of optimal relevance). The literary reader (or reader aiming at a literary interpretation), rather than stopping when he has a fragmentary interpretation that is relevant enough, will make an effort at integrating the result with other evidence provided by the text, achieving a richer, more wide-ranging interpretation. I have gone through this aspect in some detail in my arguments about "foregrounding" in Chapter 3, and in my discussion of indeterminacy and poetic effects in Chapter 2.

Plausibility can be analysed in terms of the manifestness of the writer's intention. The

reader aiming at a literary interpretation should make sure that his interpretation is warranted by the text, and by any other evidence he can discover. This is often where historical interpretation will come in, favouring certain interpretations, eliminating others. It may provide evidence, for example, about the original meaning of a word whose meaning has changed; of the writer's assumptions and attitudes as expressed in related texts. The role played by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance here is vital: it permits the reader to make the best hypothesis about which among a range of possible interpretations is the one the writer intended, and the one he should choose. The stronger the evidence, the more manifest the writer's intention, and hence the stronger the hypothesis about the intended interpretation. A relevance-theoretic framework thus allows us to describe and defend the role of plausibility or judgement, on principled terms. My discussion in the first two chapters indicates why this should be so.

What we call *unity* is often also described as cohesion or coherence. What does this amount to in terms of relevance theory? The reader aiming at a literary interpretation spends considerable cognitive effort setting up complex, large contexts. The "cashing-out" of these efforts is directed in a particular way: the resulting effects must interact with each other, rather than remaining isolated, fragmentary, leading to nothing beyond themselves. The notion of unity can be clarified in terms of the notion of optimal relevance, and in particular the requirement of no gratuitous effort. A text so organised that different parts of it achieve their effects by strengthening the same set of assumptions, which in turn interact with each other, and with contextual assumptions derived from other parts of the text, will be particularly economical to process. The results will, moreover, gain added plausibility from the fact that all the evidence points in the same way. Thus, given two possible interpretations, one of which achieves unity while the other does not, it is the one that achieves unity which, according to the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance, should be preferred.

Clearly, arriving at such an interpretation takes more time than is required for spontaneous comprehension. Typically, spontaneous comprehension does not involve conscious reflection for the purpose of enriching, developing and unifying the interpretation. The hallmarks of the literary interpretation, then, can be summarised in terms of a set of aims. The reader aiming at a literary interpretation attempts to account for all the evidence provided in the work; he tries to explore the range of assumptions intentionally made manifest; and his

aim is to derive an interpretation which is reinforced and extended on the basis of assumptions made manifest throughout the work.

As we see, the literary interpretation differs from a spontaneous interpretation not in kind but in degree. Both are designed to recognise the author's intentions; both are governed by considerations of optimal relevance. But just as a student, or casual reader, may be able to make only partial sense of an article or lecture, so a casual reader, reading for pleasure, may be able to make only partial sense of a text. He will, in any case, achieve fewer effects than a sophisticated writer would have intended. Finally, the essential difference between spontaneous and literary interpretations is not only one of quality or richness (though that is actually the usual case). A spontaneous interpretation, no matter what its calibre, need not meet standards beyond the individual's own. A literary interpretation, on the other hand, is produced precisely to be judged against others' ("public") standards of acceptability, and is *expected* to be exhaustive, plausible, and unified.

Ideally, then, a literary interpretation is one that *could* occur to the reader who produces a spontaneous interpretation if he spent all the time the literary interpreter did; had access to all the contexts and assumptions the literary reader does; and had the experience in reading that the literary reader has and shared the aims of the reader who is producing the literary interpretation.[57] Note that I am distinguishing between the literary interpretation constructed over time in the mind of a literary reader, and the (partial, fragmentary) summary of this that may get published and circulated for evaluation. It is this latter description which is itself interpreted, and which merely makes manifest (rather than explicitly stating) much of what was in the literary interpreter's mind.

We might wonder, then, if there is such a thing as the ideal or perfect literary interpretation. If the arguments of this thesis have been correct, the answer is "no". There will always be differences among interpretations, even those acknowledged as excellent because of their exhaustiveness, plausibility and unity. What is made manifest by a literary work goes far beyond what is actually entertained.

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[57] It is probably this intuition about the process of literary interpretation that led Culler to formulate his notion of "literary competence" (Culler 1981). Pilkington (1994) argues cogently against this notion. Although I will not be criticising it directly, my arguments in the following pages about the literary work's intended audience apply equally to "literary competence".

3. Eisegetical interpretation

Let's look at the ways in which an eisegetical interpretation may differ from either spontaneous or literary interpretations. Spontaneous and literary interpretations are what we might call *exegetical* interpretations: that is, they are geared to what the writer *intended* to communicate, and depend crucially on the reader recognising the writer's intentions. As we have seen, these intentions are not best seen as intentions to communicate a determinate set of assumptions. The weaker the communication, the greater the reader's share of the responsibility. Nevertheless, the result is thought of as what the *writer* intended to get across, with the reader's help. The same cannot be said of eisegetical interpretations. In this kind of interpretation, the reader produces an interpretation which is personally significant, but which goes beyond anything that the writer could have intended. The result is not so much "what the writer means", but "what the work means *to me*."

The two notions might be thought of as related in the following way. Any communicator aiming at optimal relevance must expect the information she is offering to achieve actual relevance, that is, to be generally worth the audience's attention. And in order to identify the intended relevance, the audience typically has to go beyond it, finding further, unintended (or only very generally intended) effects. Thus, an element of eisegetical interpretation is typically necessary as a step in recognising the intended interpretation; and the effort of recognising the intended interpretation must ultimately be justified by the range of eisegetical interpretations it gives rise to. In the relevance-theoretic framework, where responsibility is shared between writer and reader, the one type of interpretation is seen as shading off imperceptibly into the other.

Precisely because literary works are cases of ostensive-inferential communication we are justified in producing interpretations (exegetical, both spontaneous and literary) of them. There are kinds of "literary" interpretations or commentaries, though, which are often classed with the sort I have been discussing, but which do not belong with them at all. Literary historical "interpretations", socio-economic "interpretations", feminist or psychoanalytic or political "interpretations" do not typically aim to recognise the writer's overt intention so much as they aim to discover accidental or covert information transfer. They may aim to put the writer's work in a context which throws light on the writer's hidden motives, place in literary history, influences, implications, or personality. They may use the writer's ostensive

intentions to contrast her stated goals, or to comment on the ethos of a period, or to shed light on cultural assumptions. However, none of these aims is properly exegetical, and I would argue that these are either not interpretations at all, but simply commentaries; or they are varieties of eisegetical interpretation (since they seek to develop interpretations of the work in contexts unintended or unforeseen by the writer, and for the purpose of developing the significance of the work to the reader in ways that ignore or even go against the writer's own intentions). This is not to say that such interpretations cannot add to our understanding of the writer's overt intentions, and may in fact substantially deepen them; it is only to say that such effects would be accidental and incidental to the writer's own goals.

I would like here to distinguish among various sorts of eisegetical interpretations. There are entirely legitimate eisegetical interpretations (mentioned above) which first identify the intended interpretation, and then make personal use of the results. Any writer would want her readers to make this sort of use of her work, though it is done entirely on the reader's responsibility. Then there are eisegetical interpretations which are illegitimate because they attribute to the author the *intention* to communicate this entirely personal application; illegitimate eisegetical interpretations attribute to the writer something that seems relevant to the reader but which was not, in fact, either intended or evidenced. There are also cases where a critical reader is not really interpreting at all, but is instead diagnosing hidden motives, unsuspected consequences and so on, which are not, *and are not presented as*, part of the author's intentions. In this third kind of eisegesis, the reader has stopped treating the work as communication at all; here he is searching for the relevance of the text as a phenomenon. In this last case, we are really talking about cognition or commentary rather than communication.

Let's return to what separates exegetical and eisegetical interpretations. Crucially, they use different contextual assumptions. We have looked at the notion of intended contexts in Chapter 1, where I argued that recognition of the intended context is part of the interpretive process by which the writer's intentions are recognised. However, there are other contexts as well. There are, obviously, contexts the writer may have suspected the work might make accessible to the reader, but which she did not intend him to use. A writer aiming at optimal relevance should try to ensure that the intended context will be more easily accessible than any other context the reader might construct. There are, also, contexts which the work makes accessible to the reader, but which the writer did not foresee. So, when the speaker in

Seamus Heaney's poem *Half-Term Break* concludes the account of his brother's death with a line describing the coffin:

(2) A four foot box, a foot for every year.

the reader is intended to draw the conclusion that the brother was four years old, using the contextual assumption in (3).

(3) If the length of the coffin is four feet, and if there is one foot for every year of the boy's life, then the boy is four years old.

An alternative assumption not warranted by the text would be (3a):

(3a) If there is one foot of length to the coffin for every year of the boy's life, then if the boy were eight years old, the coffin would be eight feet long.

(3a) is a burlesque of the intended interpretation. This can be explained on the assumption that the writer was aiming at optimal relevance. Assumption (3a) is less accessible than assumption (3), and is contradicted by highly manifest assumptions (such as everything we know about the rate of children's growth). It is disallowed by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance, for although it may become more accessible, it is not made *manifest*. On the other hand, a reader looking for *personal* significance rather than *intended* significance might well find some such assumption worth reflecting on: for example, for the light it sheds on the lack of a necessary connection underlying the statement in (2).

There are also contexts which the writer could not have foreseen. Generally these result from changes in the world since the work was written. When there are technological changes, for example, many works of science-fiction give rise to unintended effects. Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles* are now more likely to be read as fables than as serious attempts to set narratives in a possible future world. When there are changes in language usage, the reader may find it difficult or impossible to access the contexts the writer intended. The most notorious case of language change is probably the shift in the use of the word "gay". The result of this shift has been that for the present some works are not worth introducing into a classroom. Another case was used as the basis for an incident in the novel *Up the Down Staircase*, in which a young teacher is cautioned not to expose herself to ridicule by attempting to teach the Emily Dickinson poem "There is no frigate like a book" in a room full of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds (Kaufman 1969: 117).

In eisegetical interpretations, we often find that the reader has used contexts which are unintended, unforeseen, or unforeseeable from the writer's point of view. While such

interpretations may well have a richness, consistency and unity comparable to the best of exegetical interpretations, to the extent that they could not have been intended by a writer aiming at optimal relevance, they are entirely the reader's responsibility.

This is not a purely academic point. Let's go back to the question I raised twice in the last chapter, about the legitimacy of using biographical material about the writer in constructing interpretations of her work. Although I touched on this briefly in the course of my discussion of the Yeats poem, I opened up the issue in discussing *Villette*. At the time of writing the novel, Brontë knew that most of her readers had penetrated Currer Bell's facade and discovered the author was a woman living in the North.[58] She lived in such obscurity in Haworth, though, and was so retiring on her excursions to London, that she most probably believed that the details of her life and personality were both unavailable and irrelevant to her contemporary readers' reception of her novels. She knew she had excited a great deal of interest, but so far from gratifying it, continued to live in the near-deserted parsonage with the memories of her family as her only companions for weeks at a time. In fact, it was not until Elizabeth Gaskell published her sensational biography in 1856 that many people beyond her immediate circle had much of an inkling of her life and character.

Under those circumstances, it is unlikely that Brontë intended her contemporary readers to process *Villette* (or the earlier novel *The Professor*) in a context including details about her experiences and personality. On this point, we might compare reading *Villette* with interpreting, say, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, or *Ulysses*. In both of these works, Joyce strongly communicates his intention that the reader resort to biographical information about him for an intelligible interpretation. Again, Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* is so closely and explicitly based on the events of his own life that the reader is quite justified in treating it in parts as thinly-disguised autobiography. Such an interpretation is not necessary in the same way as it is for the Joyce works; but neither is it unwarranted.

To return to *Villette*, though, let's say I read first the novel and then an account of Brontë's life (the case will differ slightly if I reverse the process). I discover similarities between the events and characters of the fiction, and events and characters in fact. I may do

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[58] See Gérin's biography for more details of Brontë's assumptions about the degree to which she had concealed her identity, and the degree to which the publication of *Shirley* had unmasked her. Brontë flattered herself that her writing completely concealed her identity, and was distressed that her sex was so quickly and easily found out. Her shock at being recognised by her Haworth neighbours indicates at least her unconsciousness of any essential link between her writing and her personal life.

more, though; I may discover similarities between the lives of both Brontë and Snowe, on the one hand, and my own life, on the other. I may then go on to decide that the similarities are relevant enough to warrant the effort of processing the novel (or parts of it) in a context including the facts of Brontë's life, their similarity to Snowe's account, and to my own experiences.

I may be reasonably sure that Brontë was to some extent aware of the similarities between her life and Snowe's, and that the comparisons I undertake may help me uncover the intended interpretation. They will also, of course, yield contextual implications that are no part of what Brontë intended: that I therefore draw entirely on my own responsibility: conclusions, say, about Brontë's character and way of life. On the other hand, I can be quite sure that she was not aware of any similarities between her life, her character's life, and my own, and that, moreover, she did not intend that her audience be restricted to people with these properties.

Of course, a novel may be intended to be personally significant to readers, and indeed to change their lives. Upton Sinclair, in *The Jungle*, for instance, does make manifest his intention that the reader should construct an interpretation that will change his view of the world in certain fairly specific ways. In particular, Sinclair manifestly intends the reader of his novel to accept the need for specific changes in society, and in employment practices in the Chicago meat trade; if the novel has communicated Sinclair's intention with sufficient force, the reader may even work for such changes. I may assume that Brontë intended *Villette* to change my view of the world in some way, but not in any way that would not be quite general to her intended audience. The more specific and personal the ways in which the novel alters my view of the world, and the more idiosyncratic the contexts I have used, the less these alternatives could have been foreseen *and* intended. At this point, we move beyond weak communication into the domain of cognition, where the individual tries to make sense of the world in his own way.

So eisegetical interpretations differ from both spontaneous and literary interpretations. In particular, the contexts which the reader uses to construct eisegetical interpretations are often so idiosyncratic that they could be neither foreseen nor intended by the writer. In cases where anachronistic eisegetical interpretations are produced of older works, the reader would have to demonstrate that the writer was aware not only of his idiosyncratic context, but of states of affairs that were decades, even centuries in the future. Such claims are actually

made of a number of texts, from sacred works (traditionally the province of eisegetical interpretation) to the books of Nostradamus.

Often, critical studies of literary works are a mixture of exegesis and eisegesis. On the one hand, the critic interprets the text in the way the author (is assumed to have) intended. On the other hand, critical studies include evaluations, critical commentaries, and comparisons with other writers, which are certainly made on the critic's own responsibility, and presented as such. In this thesis, I have been mainly concerned with exegetical interpretation, since this seems to me to be a necessary pre-condition for adequate criticism. It is not, however, the only task a critic must perform. In the same way, in listening to a spontaneous utterance, we are simultaneously trying to understand what the speaker intended to communicate, to make our own decisions about the value of this, and gathering all sorts of unrelated information about her social origins, interests, state of mind, dialect, for future use. The former falls within the domain of intentional communication, and the latter within the domain of cognition.

We can see that eisegetical and exegetical interpretations are not different classes as such. Instead they represent the extreme ends of a spectrum of interpretive activity; they also demonstrate the continuum between communication and cognition. Although the activity is essentially the same, in broadly exegetical interpretations the reader is seeking ultimately to recognise the interpretation the writer intended him to. On the other hand, in eisegetical interpretation, the reader is seeking specifically to develop an interpretation of the work that will shed light on the circumstances of his own life. Crucially, each reader will construct different kinds of contexts, and the contexts used to derive an eisegetical interpretation need not be at all those that the writer manifestly intended her reader to construct. Eisegetical interpretations may well be rich and satisfying readings of a work; they may even have literary qualities (as a well-constructed spontaneous interpretation may have); but the aim of the reader is quite different, and any similarity in effects and quality is incidental.

4. Variations in literary interpretation

We are still left with questions about literary interpretations, and about literariness. How, specifically, can relevance theory account for variations among literary interpretations? What can relevance theory add to our understanding of literariness? Is there a relationship

between what we intuitively recognise as "literary" works, and our intuitions about what constitutes a classic? And if so, then can this relationship shed light on current arguments about what works ought to be taught, on what we mean by the canon?

Let us start with the most obvious of these issues: variations in literary interpretation. Critics, teachers, writers, readers, and students grapple with the fact that although the text of a work does not alter substantially over time, or from one reader (or reading) to the next, no two literary interpretations are alike. Each interpretation differs in some way from all others, but all involve the criterion of acceptability I introduced in Chapter 1.

In that chapter I mentioned Pettersson's work, in which he compares four interpretations of Gray's *Elegy*. We are now in a position to return to the issues raised by these interpretations and the ways in which they differ. I have excerpted Pettersson's descriptions of the four interpretations in Appendix B, and included the *Elegy* in Appendix A.

Pettersson has chosen the interpretations of Lonsdale (1973), Wright (1977), Logsdon (1973), and Weinbrot (1978). Their readings meet the criteria I have been proposing for literary interpretations, for they attempt to account for all the evidence in the poem (exhaustiveness), to recognise the interpretation the poet intended (plausibility), and to identify the central "bit" of information which ought to constitute a crucial part of the context in which the entire poem (or any part of it) is processed (unity). All four interpretations attempt to develop fairly complex ideas and support their claims with frequent, detailed references to the poem. Any summary will of course reduce this complexity to a simplicity the critics did not intend, a fact that should be borne in mind. It is for this reason that I have appended Pettersson's summaries and discussions of their interpretations.

(4) *Lonsdale* uses Gray's earlier version of the *Elegy* (the "Stanzas") as evidence that the speaker of the poem, overwhelmed at his isolation and the waste of his finer qualities, finds escape in the contemporary doctrine of the centrality of sympathy - and has produced the *Elegy* as proof that he possesses this sympathy. Ultimately, though he is not really one of the villagers, he accepts sharing their lot as a solution to his quandary.

(5) *Wright* concentrates on Gray's images, claiming that he uses them to explore the contrasts between time and timelessness, movement and stillness; he interprets all the issues raised by the poem in these terms. The extended metaphoric treatment of these issues leads to a widely-accepted conclusion:

that God is the "only and absolute guarantee against absolute stillness", that divine memory ensures against oblivion for rich and poor alike.

(6) *Logsdon* asserts that the speaker, far from feeling alienated from the villagers, identifies with them through his affinity with the "rude forefathers" they have in common. He suspects that great gifts may lie fallow in the villagers but refuses to waste his own talents, using them instead to memorialise his union with the villagers, a union that will be consummated by his own death.

(7) *Weinbrot* sees the poem as the attempt of an ambitious man to accept his obscurity by reflecting that death is the great leveller. For Weinbrot, the poem traces the progress the speaker makes from alienation to resignation through the moral choice of linking himself with the poor and humble, and accepting God's will; this approach provides comfort and a reward for his sympathy with the villagers.

All four interpretations are sophisticated and coherent. None of the critics has contradicted the evidence of the poem, even those who use the earlier version, the "Stanzas", to develop or support their conclusions. In every case, the central idea of the poem, as the critic has identified it, is largely similar to the ideas identified by the other three. Are we to assume then, that the differences between them are unimportant, and that any of these interpretations is as acceptable as another?

Recall that according to relevance theory,

> ...the task of the addressee is to find an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance - that is, an interpretation which the communicator could manifestly have expected to be optimally relevant. (Sperber and Wilson 1986a: 169)

and that

> [t]he first interpretation tested and found consistent with the principle of relevance is the *only* interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance, and is the one the hearer should choose. (Wilson and Sperber 1992: 70)

Relevance theory would suggest, then, that these distinctions are not unimportant *even though* they are the inevitable outcome of attempting to identify the intended interpretation in the sort of conscious fashion I have been describing and demonstrating. Now, writers on relevance theory are not of one voice in this matter. Wilson and Sperber (1992: 76) might be thought

to imply that literary interpretations of the kind I have been discussing cannot have been intended by the writer:

> It is tempting, in interpreting a literary text from an author one respects, to look further and further for hidden implications. Having found an interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance - an interpretation (which may be very rich and very vague) which the writer might have thought of as adequate repayment for the reader's effort - why not go on and look for ever richer implications and reverberations? If we are right, and considerations of relevance lie at the heart of verbal communication, such searches go beyond the domain of communication proper. Though the writer might have *wished* to communicate more than the first interpretation tested and found consistent with the principle of relevance, she cannot rationally have *intended* to.

I will try to show that this interpretation of Sperber and Wilson's argument is mistaken.

Here we are back to the issues I raised and discussed in the first two chapters. It is tempting to lay most of the responsibility for literary interpretations on the critical reader, to take Wilson and Sperber's comments in a way that does violence to their view of interpretation. But this is not what the passage means. The point is that most spontaneous interpretations do *not* justify the claim that the text as a whole is optimally relevant, precisely because they do not use all the evidence provided in the text and elsewhere. It may well be that none of the literary interpretations published achieves full optimal relevance either - though at least they attempt to deal with the text as a whole. The issue discussed in the quoted passage is precisely about the borderline between eisegetical and exegetical interpretation: no more and no less than that.

Recall that although a literary interpretation requires a great deal more time and effort than are normally expended on the interpretation of utterances, nevertheless the reader is still seeking to identify the interpretation the writer intended him to recognise. In addition, he will choose the *first* interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance (the one the writer could manifestly have intended to be optimally relevant); and it will be, for him, the *only* interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance.

The crucial difference between spontaneous and literary interpretations is that literary interpretations are also *intended* to be indefinitely expandable: that is, in relevance-theoretic terms, the writer expects the reader to explore the full range of assumptions intentionally

made manifest, even if these do not immediately come to mind. The critical reader expects that he will return to a work and extend (and perhaps revise) his original interpretation. Nevertheless, on each occasion, he will have exactly the same interpretive goal as he did the first time he read the work: to find an optimally relevant interpretation of the text as a whole. Could the writer of a literary work have expected this of her reader?

I believe the answer is that she could: otherwise we would have to assume that literary interpretations (because of the extent to which they are revisited and extended) are constructed entirely on the reader's responsibility: clearly a conclusion at odds with the arguments and evidence I have been presenting. In such a case, the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance would cease to apply, and the reader would merely engage in a search for maximal relevance as he would with other non-communicative phenomena. But I have been arguing for a distinction between exegetical and eisegetical interpretations, as relevance theory argues for a distinction between cognition and communication, precisely in terms of recognition of the intended interpretation. If an interpretation is intended, and the writer provides the reader with what she believes is sufficient evidence for such recognition, then responsibility for exegetical, literary interpretation is shared between reader and writer. The degree of responsibility is determined not only by the determinacy of the intended interpretation, but by the degree to which the writer makes her intentions (mutually) manifest.

How can this argument be reconciled with the above quotation from Wilson and Sperber? The answer is that even literary interpretations of complex works rarely succeed in making sense of *all* the available evidence - and hence typically fall short of showing how the text was intended to achieve optimal relevance. The more complex the work, the more is made manifest by it. A given literary interpretation may achieve only partial success, and leave open the way for future attempts. Wilson and Sperber's remark was not meant to rule out this sort of return to a text (which is warranted in reading complex academic works such as *Relevance*, as well). It was meant to rule out *unwarranted* over-interpretations: for example, the extraction of political messages which the writer *might* have been capable of formulating, but for which there is no evidence whatsoever in the text - what I have been calling eisegetical interpretation.

The case of propagandistic and didactic novels, such as Sinclair's, might seem to contradict this position. However, this is not the case. Recall the definition of communication in a relevance theory framework. Successful communication takes place as long as the

intended assumptions and attitudes are identified (whether individually or via some general description). Whether the audience also comes to share them is a separate question. Of course, the writer's ulterior purpose may often be to alter the reader's assumptions and attitudes - but he can't do this unless the reader can first identify which assumptions and attitudes he intended to change. Sperber and Wilson, like many other philosophers of inferential communication, insist that we make this distinction between recognising the intended message and being convinced by it. The first is a necessary pre-condition to the second: and it is what pragmatics is about. In the case of Sinclair's novel, we would say that he cannot have intended to communicate less than the first interpretation tested and found consistent with the principle of relevance. We might say that he had an ulterior, non-communicative purpose, that went beyond merely being understood. Novels with similar ulterior motives, such as Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, make their didactic purposes strongly manifest. Nevertheless, though Stowe's desire is clearly manifest, the reader need not adopt the intended attitudes in order to construct a successful interpretation of the novel. Understanding will be achieved just as long as he recognises Stowe's intention to make the intended set of assumptions manifest.

A rather different view of the implications of relevance theory for literary interpretation has been suggested (very briefly) by Kiparsky (1987). He comments that

> ...while the interpretation of dialogue is constrained by the principle that the speaker formulates his sentences in such a way that the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance that occurs to the addressee is the intended one, the reading of literary works is not, and they are consequently open to constant reinterpretation. (Kiparsky 1987: 187)

If literary interpretation characteristically aims at producing an exhaustive, plausible and unified interpretation - as I have argued, and as Kiparsky himself maintains - then it will necessarily require far more effort and time than will spontaneous interpretation. Each revision of the initial interpretation may be seen as a new reading, but there is no reason to assume that the writer did not intend that this latest interpretation should be the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance *to any reader who has invested the time and effort required to produce it at that time.* In *Relevance,* Sperber and Wilson remark that

> We assume ... that the lengthy and highly self-conscious process of textual

> interpretation that religious or literary scholars engage in are governed just as much by the principle of relevance as is spontaneous utterance comprehension. (1986a: 75)

As we saw, spontaneous interpretations of a literary work typically are not significantly revised, precisely because they are not normally complex enough to need revision. Since the aims of spontaneous interpretation differ from the literary interpretation, this will not be surprising. In the same way, since the aims of dialogue generally differ from the aims of literary works (in an analogous fashion) we will expect that spontaneous interpretations of utterances produced in dialogue will also typically not be revised. They can be, of course; and then, depending on the aims of the interpretation (exegetical or eisegetical; detecting information transmitted covertly or accidentally) we can characterise these revisions along much the same lines as I have sketched above.

The variant interpretations of Gray's poem provide a way of examining these claims more closely. If Kiparsky's view is correct, then there could be several interpretations, all consistent with the principle of relevance. In that case, the reader should not stop at the first such interpretation, but continue on and identify others, each one perhaps differing in the degree to which it spells out certain implications of the text. Against this view, I will argue that each literary interpretation merely spells out part of what is made manifest (communicated) by the text: but that only one is consistent with the principle of relevance at a given time.

5. Gray's *Elegy*: variant readings

Literary interpretations, I have argued, are in some sense public property. They are meant to be read, evaluated, discussed, updated, disagreed about. Literary works are also public property, in that their writers expect them to be interpreted by a wide variety of readers. They are unlike a private conversation, which is intended for a particular audience only. And I would argue that their multiple readers are not eavesdropping: they are being overtly addressed; the work is overtly intended for them.

My disagreement with Kiparsky can perhaps be traced to this assumption. In the above quotation, Kiparsky seems to exempt literary interpretation from consistency with the principle of relevance, or at least to loosen the criterion for pragmatic acceptability so that

in a literary work the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is *not* the only one. This, he suggests in a footnote, is:

> [p]erhaps as a consequence of the fact that the reader of a literary work is not strictly its addressee. (Kiparsky 1987: 196)

The question is what it means to say that the reader of a literary work is not *strictly* its addressee. On the strongest possible interpretation, it could mean that a literary work *has* no addressee, and is not a case of ostensive communication at all. If this is true, then there is no possibility of ever distinguishing between exegetical and eisegetical interpretations: every literary interpretation must then be by definition eisegetical. This is, of course, precisely the position I have been arguing against throughout this thesis, and given the tenor of Kiparsky's paper, it is unlikely that he would adopt it himself.

But we can take another view of Kiparsky's argument. He may be arguing that the author has some general idea of the sort of audience (sports lovers, shy people, human beings) he is writing for. The broader the intended audience, it might be argued, the less interpretation should hinge on information specific to a certain time, place and so on. I will take up this reading of his argument in the next section, but for now I want to return to the first position.

I will argue against the first interpretation of Kiparsky's position in two ways: first, by demonstrating that there are qualitative as well as quantitative distinctions among even sophisticated and intelligent literary readings; and second, by making the case for literary works as instances of intentional communication. We will look briefly at the merits of the four variant readings to see if the differences between them can be reduced to preference. I will specifically argue that some of the interpretations are more faithful to Gray's manifest intentions than others, and that one is better than the rest.[59] Then we will turn to the question of the addressee of literary works. I will make the case that we could not have so identified one interpretation unless we were *intended* to have picked it out - that is, unless the poet intended to communicate something like this interpretation to his audience. The fact that he could not identify either his audience or the set of communicated propositions individually does not affect the fact that he has addressed us.

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[59] Kiparsky proposes a similar comparison of variant readings of a poem by Blake, and suggests that one should be preferred for reasons of exhaustiveness, coherence, and so on. In his case, though, the variant readings contradict one another, and are therefore not all possible.

As I have mentioned, all four readings are acceptable in the sense that none contradicts the evidence provided by the poem. All four interpretations also identify roughly the same set of implicatures as the "central idea" of the poem. Let's look at what this set probably consists of.

The speaker of the poem is prey to twin fears: that his identity, his unique talents and gifts, will vanish in the obscurity of the village he feels he is trapped in; and that he will be forgotten when he joins the dead among whose graves he presently wanders. These fears are first aggravated by his observations of the fate of the humble people he lives with; he fantasizes that many great talents (he appears to count his own among these, but the evidence is inconclusive) might have gone to waste in the human desert of the village. He intensifies his melancholy by reflecting on the delights that even the poor must leave behind when they enter into death. Out of these observations, however, twin comforts arise. He first reflects that the villagers have been preserved from committing great evils as well as prevented from making great achievements. He then observes that the humble and the great alike erect memorials against the fear of being forgotten; and realises, too, that their efforts are in vain, for eventually everyone passes into obscurity. His solution to both is to rest in the conviction that as one's destiny is in the hands of God, so one's ultimate remembrance is in the mind of the Almighty.

This passage does not just sum up the main evidence of the poem, but attempts to identify the central ideas without which no interpretation of the poem can succeed. It is necessarily rough because to go beyond it would involve using these assumptions as context in a more detailed reading. We note, however, that all four critics clearly accept these assumptions, or a set closely resembling them, as central to their interpretations and as intended by Gray. To what degree do their more developed interpretations differ from this set, and from one another?

Wright's interpretation is probably the cleverest and the least satisfying. He does not contradict the central idea as I have summarized it, but expresses it in the form of a metaphor. He sees the poem's subject as the "nature and meaning of epitaphs", explored in the contrasts between time and timelessness, movement and stillness. The problem with his reading is precisely its aim: to demonstrate that the specific ways people deal with the fear of death and forgetfulness are common to radically different groups (social, educational, and economic classes) and are therefore universal. This aim is so general that it may be applied to any

poem on approximately the same topic. It equally well describes, for example, the Housman poem discussed in Chapter 1.[60]

Wright shows that it is possible to express the ideas of the poem in the terms of extended metaphor. If nothing else, this demonstrates the consistency (or unity) of the poem, and strongly implies that all the ideas explored are closely related. However, Wright's interpretive framework is both too inclusive and too impoverished. It is possible, as I have suggested, to read almost any similar work along these lines; and yet the metaphor does not account for the melancholy of the poem, for the complex allusions (Hampden, Milton, Cromwell) or for the deeply religious conviction Gray proposes as a solution to his dilemma. Religious convictions, like the other profoundly important human experiences recounted in the *Elegy*, are not reducible to a single image, a single argument, or a single set of contrasts. In effect, Wright has reduced a complex relationship to a set of binary contrasts or oppositions, and so impoverished it.

We therefore reject Wright's clever reading as an acceptable account on the basis both of plausibility and exhaustiveness. None of the other three interpretations take such a narrow basis, so we might assume that there is less to choose among here. But if we look at Lonsdale's interpretation, we discover that it, too, is not quite acceptable when compared with the others.

Lonsdale captures the central set of assumptions in his claim that the speaker relies on the centrality of sympathy to escape from his dilemma about the two modes of life (of the poor and humble, and the great and proud). His argument that the poem's sense of waste springs from the neglect and isolation of the youth's potential is also sound. However, his assertion that the flower and gem metaphors do not apply to the villagers' lives (rather, to the speaker's) is not tenable: the lines of stanza 15 clearly link the unfulfilled talents of the rude forefathers with the previous images.

In the end, Lonsdale's interpretation is impoverished, though not inaccurate. He has really only given a summary of the poem's main points, and added enough information about

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[60] This poem also explores the contrasts between time and eternity, activity and stillness, in even more obvious terms than the *Elegy*. It is also concerned with the nature and meaning of epitaphs, and the preservation of memory. Yet only an unsophisticated or careless reader would equate the two poems, or assert that their writers had near-identical intentions, if for no other reason than that Housman's poem has a clearly pagan air while Gray's is resolutely Christian. This alone means that they are working in very different contexts and that their readers cannot draw similar conclusions about the meaning of memory.

Gray's contemporaries' attitudes to overcome most of the difficulties a modern reader might experience. He links the techniques the poet uses (multiple points of view, the involuted syntax) with the effects the poem creates (Gray is avoiding portraying himself subjectively). But he does not directly address the central conflicts of the poem, nor discuss the emotional and intellectual solutions the speaker has applied to his problems with waste and forgetfulness. We therefore feel that for all its virtues, this interpretation is insufficient.

Weinbrot's interpretation suffers from a different weakness: his implication that the speaker finds comfort in his choice of eternity (by putting his trust in God) is not supported by the strongly communicated sense of melancholy that pervades the entire poem. In particular, the Epitaph specifically states that "Melancholy marked him for her own". Though Heaven has granted him "recompense", we should notice that his "tear" is given the same value ("all he had" and "all he wished") as the "friend" which he finds there. Weinbrot claims that the speaker has abandoned his self-centredness, and seems to see in the poem more a moral lesson than a meditation on the philosophical and human dilemma of destiny, will, and virtue.

This weakness is, curiously, also the strength of Weinbrot's interpretation. He concentrates on the moral dimension of the poem, a dimension which would have been apparent to Gray's original audience. The speaker is clearly aiming at the resignation Weinbrot describes: the question is whether or not he has achieved it. However, the conflict between this conclusion and his claim about Gray's "contentment" means that Weinbrot has not satisfactorily resolved these apparent contradictions.

This problem is addressed by Logsdon, whose interpretation seems to be the most faithful to the poem in many ways. Logsdon produces a fertile and plausible reading of the poem. In particular, his recognition that the poet's simple feeling for the villagers is deepened intellectually answers many of the questions left by the other critics. To recognise that the speaker's affinity with the villagers (which is initially fearful and primarily at an emotional level) changes to a conviction that has been achieved intellectually is to take into account the highly sophisticated writing techniques of the poem. It is also to recognise, however, that the intellectual and emotional levels of acceptance are quite different. Although the speaker has "taught himself" resignation, emotionally he remains to some degree the prey of melancholy and fear.

If we attempt to decide which of these four interpretations is the "ideal" or "intended"

one, we find ourselves trying to make a decision based on false oppositions. Just as Alice could not make up her mind which of the Walrus or the Carpenter was deserving of sympathy, so we find we cannot accept any of the interpretations in its entirety. We do not want to conclude, though, that we never make such judgements, or that it is impossible to make such decisions. Instead, having identified the central set of assumptions the writer intended to communicate, we continue to refine our understanding of the poem in that context while attempting to make that central set more accurate and productive.

Clearly, the process I have just described, and illustrated, is not the one we undergo when interpreting the majority of spoken utterances, especially in dialogue. The fact that we can evaluate, discuss and reject interpretations of literary works might seem to clinch the argument that they are inherently quite different from dialogue. The conclusion would then be that the principle of relevance does not govern the interpretation of literary works (at least to the same extent, or in the same way, as it governs spontaneous comprehension). But this is to muddle product and process, and to draw unwarranted conclusions.

There are qualitative differences among the four interpretations of the *Elegy*. There are also ways of choosing which of the interpretations, or which aspects of the interpretations, are more acceptable. In discussing the four variant interpretations, I did precisely this. More importantly, I did so by attempting to recognise Gray's intention, to account exhaustively and consistently for the evidence he had provided for that intention, and to produce a unified hypothesis. Ultimately, then, the standards of acceptability among literary interpretations seem to rely on the same criterion as for the interpretations of spoken utterances in dialogue.

But Kiparsky's second point - that in literary works there is strictly speaking no addressee - is also worth considering, since it might well account for the multiplicity of interpretations. Can we argue that the writer of a literary work does, strictly speaking, address herself to an audience?

6. The literary work and its audience

If we take the strong (and, as I have suggested, mistaken) interpretation of Kiparsky's argument, then we can only treat literary works as natural phenomena, with no constraining conditions other than those following from the evidence provided by the work. We have already seen in Chapter 1 where this road takes us, and how unsatisfactory these constraints really

are.

However, it is fair to say that no writer of literary works foresees a specific readership or restricts her audience to a select set of readers. We now must consider the weak reading of Kiparsky's argument: that the writer has no specific addressee in mind, and so the corollary to the principle of relevance applies either with less force or not at all. Since the intended audience is so broad, Kiparsky suggests, the individual reader is not entitled to take the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance. Instead, he may go on to construct alternative interpretations, which may be more satisfactory.

At first sight, the evidence may seem to support this argument. It seems to be a defining characteristic of literary works that the readers (casual and critical) ought to be heterogeneous and generally representative of their population to some degree. Those works which are aimed at a small set of readers, and which never appeal beyond that limited set, rarely satisfy our intuitive sense of literariness (except in the most academic sense). How can we reconcile the lack of a specific intended audience with the claim (endorsed by Kiparsky) that literary works are cases of intentional communication?

Literary works are not the only forms of communication without specific intended audiences. Consider some analogous communicative situations. At the outset of each term I am faced with a classroom of unfamiliar faces. I address myself to the class as a group, necessarily without regard for their individual situations. Now, it is true that I have a specific audience in mind - in fact, directly in front of me - but I can characterise them only in general terms. I can make several assumptions about them: that they are all students of the institution (and therefore possess the academic qualifications to attend my course); that they can read, write and speak English; that they know that the course is in English literature; that they hope to pass the course by successfully completing the work I give them; that the majority of them will be natives of my province; and so on. However, of their class and economic situations, their previous academic and life experiences, their individual capacities and motives for this course, even of their names, I am entirely ignorant. However, it is possible for me to communicate with this audience though I have only the most general ideas about them.

In most dialogue situations, it is usually quite a different story. If, as Sperber and Wilson point out, style in communication is a function of (assumed) relationship (1986: 217), then the communicator will

... make some assumptions about the hearer's cognitive abilities and

> contextual resources, which will necessarily be reflected in the way she communicates, and in particular what she chooses to make explicit and what she chooses to leave implicit. (Sperber and Wilson 1986a: 218)

The more intimacy the communicator has with her addressee, the more assumptions she can take for granted, and the more she can tailor the style of her utterance to the needs of her addressee. Clearly, as I have as yet only the most rudimentary relationship with my students, I will provide more explicit information and leave less for the hearers to infer if I wish to avoid misunderstandings. My style of address is affected by the fact that I know almost nothing about my individual addressees.

And it is not just teachers whose style of communication is affected by an audience whose characteristics they can't be sure of. Eventually, I hope, I will become familiar with most of the individuals who are in my class, and learn more about them collectively so I can ensure my ideas will be comprehended adequately by the largest number. However, those who give public lectures have no such opportunity, and expect none (though they may assume that anyone who turns up to the lecture has sufficient interest and background information to function as an addressee in the sense Kiparsky probably means). Again, those who present to audiences they will never see, through radio, television and other electronic media, may assume only the most general characteristics of their audience. We would hardly want to say, however, that the newsreader on CNN or the weatherman giving a forecast is not a communicator because he has no specific addressee.

It might be useful to draw a parallel between having a specific audience in mind and having a specific message in mind. One might list the members of the audience; one might list the individual propositions to be communicated. But these are not the only circumstances in which intentional communication can take place. Instead of listing individual members of the intended audience, for example, one might characterise them in general terms, as having certain properties (such as being in a certain place, being members of a certain community, being interested enough to listen, being members of the human race). Similarly, instead of listing individual propositions as part of the message, one might characterise the intended message in general terms: as whatever is manifest to the writer in a certain cognitive environment, for example. These more general characterisations have not been studied much in the pragmatic literature, but both are central to the study of literary interpretation, where the writer herself may not be thinking with equal clarity about every aspect of what she is

trying to communicate, and to whom.

Let us consider, then, the idea that the newsreader, the lecturer, and the signmaker ("Way Out" in the Underground, for example) have the following general audience in mind: they are addressing those who will find their utterances relevant in the intended way. Such a characterisation implies quite precise capacities. It treats the intended audience as one with the cognitive capacities to find in the text all that the communicator intended them to find. The interesting implication, for complex works of literature, is that most actual readers will lack some of the capacities of the intended audience: yet another reason for variations among interpretations, and for the open-endedness of the literary interpretation process.

I suspect, however, that the real stumbling block for Kiparsky, is not ultimately the characteristics or the communicator's knowledge of the audience but the complexity of the literary work and its interpretation. Because we know that writers ask a great deal of their readers (even the simplest), and that even a simple work (such as *Loveliest of trees, the cherry now*) can produce such complex and varied readings, we are reluctant to believe that the first interpretation consistent with the principle of relevance is the only such interpretation. Our experience in producing and revising literary interpretations seems to indicate that we are *not* choosing the interpretation predicted by relevance theory.

However, the fact that each reading may involve the revision of an earlier one is not inconsistent with Sperber and Wilson's views. Nowhere do Sperber and Wilson say that the first interpretation which a reader produces and accepts at one time cannot be revised and rejected in the light of further evidence. Moreover, if poetic effects are produced as relevance theory describes[61] then we must expect variations not only between readers but from one reading to another, since different aspects of what is weakly communicated may be explored at different times.

We have, then, two separate views to consider. On the first view, different literary interpretations are seen as focussing on different bits of what has been intentionally communicated; in this way they may complement one another. On the second view, we can see most literary interpretations as being stages on the way to a fully acceptable optimally relevant interpretation. In this case, no one interpretation is necessarily consistent with the

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[61] See Sperber and Wilson (1986a), Wilson and Sperber (1986a, 1992), Wilson (1994) and Pilkington (1994, 1992, 1988).

principle of relevance. As a result, the literary reader occupies a more sophisticated version of the position taken by the casual reader: both are aware (to differing degrees, and with different implications) that they haven't done full justice to the work. Such an approach clearly applies to interpreting a work as complex as *Hamlet*, say, but it may also apply to less demanding texts. The more easily exhausted the possible interpretations are, the less complex and demanding the work would be.

Ultimately, then, the fact that literary interpretations are revised, and need to be revised, does not spring from a difference in the communicative situations of literary and spontaneous comprehension, but from the complexity of the utterance and the aims of the communicator. Exegetical literary interpretations can be distinguished from all others (spontaneous or eisegetical in quite broad senses) by their aims. This places literary interpretations at a band in a spectrum of interpretive activity, though, rather than excluding them from the class altogether.

I may be thought to have spent some time discussing an apparently trivial issue. However, as I want now to show, it's necessary to see literary interpretation as a legitimate form of interpretive activity, different in its aims but not in process or (fundamentally) in product. After all, I have spent most of the thesis assuming that literary interpretations are made of literary works. But I haven't explained what constitutes a literary work, or shown that literary interpretative activity can operate only over literary works, though I have assumed this is the case. I will now look briefly at the issues raised by these assumptions. There are many critics who are uneasy with them, and some, like Fish, who argue strenuously against them. The next section is not so much an attempt to answer their objections as it is an effort to consider the characteristics of a literary work.

7. Literary works and literariness

Literariness is notoriously hard to capture in a definition, or even in an intuition. Most readers will agree that certain standardly-taught novels, poems, essays and dramas are literary, but become less confident when they move beyond these works. They find themselves in the position of not knowing what art is, but knowing what they like. The link between pedagogy and our intuitions about literary art is so strong that critics such as Fish contend that there is no such object as the literary work, only a process of authorization by

which a community decides which works are literary and which are not.

There is thus a connection between literariness and social compliance, at least in the view of these critics. On the other hand, there are readers who form their opinions on literariness based on their experiences of the works they have been told are literary. They connect literariness (particularly in modern works) with difficulty in reading, with obscurity and game-playing and coercion (by the writer or educational authorities). They would probably agree with Fish and other conventionalists, at least if asked in those terms.

However, their actions and those of students of literature are somewhat different from their stated opinions. The fact is that casual readers, though they produce only spontaneous interpretations of literary works and rarely aim at literary interpretations, nevertheless broadly recognise a distinction of some kind between Judith Krantz's works and Dickens' or Dostoevsky's; and if they read more of Krantz's books, they have not entirely given up reading other, more "serious" writers for pleasure. If asked, they would probably distinguish Krantz from Dostoevsky, or even Twain (who is both literary and widely-read), and would more likely call *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* "literary", and *Scruples* "light".

Their intuitions should be taken seriously, and not dismissed as the programmed responses of a well-trained reading public. How can we test these intuitions, though? How can we distinguish *To an Athlete Dying Young* from memorial or obituary poetry published in a local paper? Let's begin where the conventionalist critics' argument seems strongest, with the notion that we can produce a literary interpretation of any text.

There are three examples I want to discuss: Ker's interpretation of the nursery rhyme cited in the first chapter; Culler's example of a news item recast as a poem; and Fish's accidental discovery that students can turn a list of names into post-modernist verse. Fish (1980) recounts how he gave an advanced poetry class a list of names arranged in a cruciform, told them it was a poem, and asked them to write essays exploring its meaning. Some very clever and quite plausible "interpretations" resulted. Fish used the essays as evidence that poems are not objects as much as the result of processes; in particular, the recognition of what a community considers "poetic" and "acceptable interpretation". Culler (1976) similarly recast a news item of two or three sentences into a poem, and proceeded to write his own "literary interpretation" of it, drawing attention to the way in which the poetic form strengthened the interpretation, and indeed to a degree seemed to have created it.

In all three cases, works which most readers (especially casual readers) would

intuitively call non-literary (a child's rhyme, a news item, a list) have apparently supported at least one literary interpretation. In all three cases, the interpreters attempted to account exhaustively for the evidence of the poem, to recognise the interpretation the reader believed the writer intended, and to identify the central set of assumptions. And all three cases demonstrate that it is possible to produce at least one literary reading of works without literary pretensions. These cases seem to suggest that no such object as the literary work exists.

However, there are other considerations. All three examples are what we could call, roughly, "lyric" works. Would anyone seriously attempt, for example, to produce a literary interpretation of an entire edition of *The Sunday Times*? or of a full page extract of the multitude of Christmas wish lists sent to local papers for publication? The moment we go beyond the limits of the lyric form (such as it is) we find the process of turning non-literary works into literature can't be duplicated. Writers who create literary works that imitate these forms produce texts that are difficult and generally unrewarding.

The lyric poem is an exceptionally elastic form. It is particularly common among contemporary poets because it permits a wide variety of readings from a short passage whose central intention is quite vague. The richness of the form is easily exploited - and readily exhausted in works of minor literary merit. Let's consider examples of lyric poems which highlight these characteristics:

(8)

Last night in London Airport
I saw a wooden bin
labelled UNWANTED LITERATURE
IS TO BE PLACED HEREIN.
So I wrote a poem
and popped it in.

(Christopher Logue)

(9)

You took away all the oceans and all the room.
You gave me my shoe-size in earth with bars around it.
Where did it get you? Nowhere.
You left me my lips, and they shape words, even in silence. (Osip Mandelstam)

In each of (8-9), the content could as easily be transcribed as prose, reversing the process by which Fish and Culler produced their "poems". The question is whether this transcription would diminish the impact of these poems, as restructuring prose apparently increased its

poetic effects. The answer is probably yes, to the extent that a reader would be less likely to invest the time and effort necessary to achieve these kind of effects, and considering that (as Culler demonstrates), poetic form generally has intended effects. The conclusion that changing the poetry to prose will make it less likely that the poem will have its intended poetic effects (the corollary of Fish's and Culler's proposal that poetic forms direct the reader to achieve appropriate poetic effects) does not nevertheless *entail* that form is the (sole) determining factor in poetic and literary texts. It only demonstrates that form can be used as evidence that the writer is encouraging the reader to invest this time and effort, and is often a guide to the types of effects intended. The reader who takes up the invitation is doing so on the basis of the presumption of relevance - that the required efforts will yield adequate effects, for no gratuitous effort.

In the case of Culler's and Fish's examples, of course, the writer gave no encouragement to the reader to look beyond the immediately accessible context: instead, the critics demonstrated the degree to which we can be encouraged by use of conventional poetic forms (or, at least, forms that differ from conventional prose forms) to expend additional efforts in the search for relevance. We know that in both cases, the critic actively encouraged the readers to aim at producing a literary interpretation by informing them that the texts were poems. Consequently, the readers would have assumed the existence of a writer with rational expectations about what she could communicate by means of the work. Such readers have been presented with a puzzle, and having invested some effort, rather than see it wasted, they persevere in looking for a solution, in terms of adequate effects.

Culler and Fish have demonstrated the degree to which readers will pursue interpretive activity when they believe there is an intended interpretation of the appropriate type. They have also shown that cultural poverty is not nearly so advanced as some fear, since casual and unsophisticated readers (as well as the very sophisticated readers of Fish's non-poem) can still recognise what a poem is supposed to look like, even if they can't understand poetry and read it only under duress. What Culler and Fish have *not* demonstrated is that form determines literariness.

(8-9) have both appeared in the series *Poems on the Underground*; so someone other than the writers considered them to have sufficient value to repay the efforts of the most casual and heterogeneous reading public: London commuters. In that context, (8) has effects which, though fairly limited, are appropriate to this audience. The poet (and the editors)

clearly encourage the reader to consider the connection between rubbish and literature, and the different uses of the term "literature". We know that the term "literature" is used to refer to advertising flyers, pamphlets, and so on. People really do say "Would you like some literature on the Belling cooker?" Although this connection is not made explicit by the poet, the presence of the poem in the centre of a good deal of unsolicited reading material (signs, advertisements, graffiti) allows the reader to compare these various forms of communication and to test the suggestion that literature is no different from them. It doesn't take much effort to decide the speaker's tone is mocking - a form of irony - and that he is probably making fun of the attitude toward literature that most people have ("rubbish") by imitating the form and typography of flyers and other "unwanted literature". In the physical context of the Underground this premise suggests several lines of thought without strongly directing the reader to any of them. Despite this apparent richness of effects, it would be hard to develop a wide variety of literary interpretations of any complexity of this work.

(9) is a more complex work, though it is even shorter. It is accompanied by a short note:

(10) In 1934, after he was discovered to be the author of a bitter satire on Stalin, Mandelstam was arrested and exiled for three years, first to a small town in the Urals, then to the provincial town of Voronezh, where this poem was written. He was rearrested in 1938, and died en route to a labour camp.

This biographical information affects the interpretation in very much the same way as the short note on Tichborne affects the interpretation of his *Elegy*. By providing information about the conditions under which the poem was composed, the editors make it possible to do quite the opposite of what most readers will attempt in (8). Instead of developing several fairly vague interpretations, the reader is now able to construct interpretations along quite definite lines. They may consider the poem as more than the pious, vague determination to remain steadfast in the face of oppression; they may see it in fact as the truthful record of a life. In understanding the price the poet paid for his actions, his poems, they are encouraged to increase the value they set on literature.

Both poems clearly concern the value of literature; but where the tone and implications of (8) remain light, the graver implications of (9) make the poet's point less directly and more powerfully. Interestingly, both depend on contextual assumptions not provided by the text for the fullest development of their implications. And both would

communicate their propositional content quite effectively (though not as powerfully) if they were presented as prose.

(11) Last night in London Airport I saw a wooden bin labelled UNWANTED LITERATURE IS TO BE PLACED HEREIN. So I wrote a poem and popped it in.

(12) You took away all the oceans and all the room. You gave me my shoe-size in earth with bars around it. Where did it get you? Nowhere. You left me my lips, and they shape words, even in silence.

One thing that is lost by changing the form is the salience of the writer's literary intentions - her intention that the reader recognise that she is encouraging him to invest the time and effort necessary to construct, and adopt the aims of, a literary interpretation. It is now less manifest that the reader is intended (or encouraged) to develop a literary interpretation. Clearly, then, poetic forms as such do not distinguish literary from non-literary texts. Instead, they provide evidence that the writer intends the reader to produce a literary interpretation - that is, to invest the time and effort needed to yield a rich, complex interpretation of the work. In relevance-theoretic terms, poetic forms communicate a presumption of a very substantial level of effects, but their most immediate purpose is to communicate the writer's guarantee that the reader will be well rewarded if he invests the effort needed to construct a literary interpretation.[62]

I would claim that it is for this reason, rather than more abstract considerations of power and social compliance, that students will assiduously attempt to produce literary interpretations of lists, news items and recipe directions if these are presented in poetic forms. That their efforts may yield fresh and interesting conclusions is not the consequence of the form, but of the fact that people are quite capable of thinking imaginatively. It is at least as easy to develop a literary reading of Culler's news item as of (9). It may even be easier, since the news item is not intended to be read as literature, and the reader is not constrained by the necessity of recognising an interpretation the writer could reasonably have intended (the plausibility condition) or of accounting for all the evidence (the exhaustiveness condition). All that is necessary is to produce a unified hypothesis; and such hypotheses, when

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[62] As Sperber and Wilson point out (1986a: 159-160), this guarantee need not be fulfilled. A bad poet, after all, makes the same claim on the reader's attention as a good one. Generally, though, the more effort invested in a good poem, the greater the rewards; this does not always apply to bad poems or non-poems of the artificial type used by Culler and Fish, where the literary interpretation, if one can be found, is in some sense accidental.

unconstrained in other directions, are extremely easy to produce.[63] What Culler and Fish (and others) have demonstrated is the easy fecundity of the lyric poetic form, and the fertility of human invention.

So it would seem that the literary work is not just a cultural invention. Literary forms, at least, do not cause the literariness of a work, though they may make manifest the writer's literary intentions and contribute to the effects achieved during interpretation. We begin to suspect that literariness may well be a property of texts. How are we to detect and describe it?

I would propose the following answer. The literary work is one that supports literary interpretations. These interpretations must be rich, varied and produced by a heterogeneous group of readers over a significant period of time (say, though I am being arbitrary, a generation or two). The problem with this answer is not the obvious one of how we characterise the readers, the period of time, the variety and richness of the interpretations. It is, rather, that it limits literary works to the best works produced.[64] This raises problems I will deal with briefly in a later section on the canon (Chapter 4, section 10). Here I want only to point out that the real problem with literariness is what it has always been.

Much as we would like to avoid it in literary and critical fields, literariness is always connected to qualitative considerations. Good works are literary because they allow the reader to develop literary interpretations. As we have seen, literary interpretations require time, effort and revision. In relevance-theoretic terms, they require a great deal of effort from the reader, and must yield correspondingly rich effects. Works which do not promise this "cashing-out", or which fail to deliver what could reasonably be regarded as adequate effects, are consequently not literary. They may well be all sorts of other things: entertaining, diverting, instructive, earnest, subversive and so on. But their specifically literary qualities are not connected to these other aims and effects. Instead, regardless of the writer's conscious

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[63] There are innumerable examples in every discipline. The most obvious case is superstitions: these are internally consistent and highly unified hypotheses developed to account for various phenomena. That they are also irrational and fail to account for external evidence is also apparent.

[64] We may recall the exchange between Anne Elliot and her cousin in Austen's *Persuasion*:

"`My idea of good company, Mr Elliot, is the company of clever, well-informed people, who have a great deal of conversation; that is what I call good company.'"

"`You are mistaken,' said he gently, `that is not good company, that is the best.'" (162)

purposes (to write a history of Rome, for example; or to criticise another writer's work[65]), a text may well come to be regarded as literary if and only if it supports literary interpretations under the conditions I have described. For that reason I want to examine these conditions briefly.

I have said that the group of readers producing the literary interpretations must be heterogeneous. By this I mean that they should represent as many sections of the potential reading public (that is, all those who can read the language in which the work is written, or into which it has been translated) as possible. Consequently we should have casual and literary readers, professional and amateur critics, members of all classes and economic strata represented in some form in the group. It need not be proportional representation (in fact, considering that reading habits and experiences are often affected by class, profession and background, this is probably unlikely), but the readers must not be characterised as select or exclusive.

Why is this necessary? We go back to the notion of the audience. When a writer aims at a very specific audience, she practically ensures that her work will not be capable of supporting literary interpretations with a significant range of variation. The more specific the audience, the more predictable the interpretations. A work designed for and read by such an audience, even over a long period of time, is not likely to be productive of the effects characteristic of literary interpretations. The readers, and hence the interpretation, will be too similar, and the significance of the work will not alter much over time. Clearly, then, one of the crucial attributes of the literary work is that it is addressed to an audience that is heterogeneous, and that is therefore characterisable in general rather than specific terms (eg, not "art historians" but "people").

Variations among readers will not automatically produce variations in interpretations. After all, London commuters all read the same directions on the Underground, and variations among their interpretations are minimal. To distinguish literary from non-literary interpretations, we therefore need a further condition: significant variation, suitably constrained, among the interpretations produced. The four interpretations I summarized above are good examples of the kind of variation I mean. They are sufficiently different from one another that they can

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[65] I am thinking, of course, of works such as Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, or Elkins' *Slavery*, or Schama's *Embarrassment of Riches*, or Thomas' *Religion and the Decline of Magic*.

be readily distinguished. Yet they all clearly concern the same poem, and what's more, the same aspects of the same poem. And all four identify the same "bit" of information as the central or core set of assumptions of the work, the set which ought to form a part of the message, and which is used in identifying the intended relevance of the poem as a whole. These two conditions - variety and constraint - will characterise an acceptable range of interpretation. Where there is insufficient variation - as noted above - we cannot claim that the work is supporting literary interpretations. Where the range of variation is very great, but there is no similarity in the core set of assumptions communicated by the work, then again we cannot claim that the work is supporting literary interpretations.[66]

The effect of the range of interpretations will not be vagueness, therefore, but richness. However, this effect may be ephemeral: a work may produce such readings only for a short period. For that reason we must consider a third condition: time. A work that is literary will support literary interpretations of sufficient variation (and stability) produced by a heterogeneous group of readers over the span of (say) at least one or two physical generations. I choose generations as a measure, not literally but metaphorically.

Traditionally, a generation measures not the span of a person's life but the conditions he experiences. In societies and periods where there is little change from one physical generation to the next, it will make more sense to talk of generations in terms of epochs, or turning points which may be decades apart. Under conditions such as we now live with, when change is so rapid that a "generation" of computers passes every two to three years, such epochs will succeed one another much more quickly. Nevertheless, we can understand a generation as consisting of conditions which give rise to contexts most easily accessible to the majority of readers of that physical generation.

A literary work, then, will continue to be relevant even when the conditions characteristic of the period in which it was written have changed considerably. A particular work may fall out of favour for a generation or two, if prevailing conditions arise in opposition to the previous state. Conversely, a work which has failed to be appreciated in its own generation, for various reasons (usually because it is too prescient about the

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[66] Notice that the core set of assumptions does not mean a summary of what is explicitly communicated by the work. The central intentions I described for Gray's *Elegy* go well beyond a summary at the same time as they fall well short of one.

conditions of that time) may come into its own in succeeding periods.[67] Regardless of the vicissitudes of its fortunes in the years immediately following its publication, a literary work will continue to be read, and to support literary interpretations, long after the conditions of its generation have passed away.

All of these conditions I have been describing primarily in intuitive terms, and quite general ones. It should be possible to recast all of them in a relevance-theoretic framework and so show that in each case we are actually describing the kind of contexts which can be constructed, the effort which must be expended, and the effects which may be achieved. However, at this stage I am merely proposing a general description; it would be fruitless to go beyond these intuitive descriptions at present, since I am connecting literariness not to an identifiable aspect of the reader, writer or text, but to the kind, quality and range of interpretations which the work supports.

Many writers may have literary pretensions or aspirations. They will provide evidence for these along the lines described above in my brief discussion of the purposes and effects of poetic forms. This evidence, which will encourage the reader to aim at a literary interpretation, can take many forms.

For one thing, the subject may be one which is recognisably "literary": that is, one which can only be properly understood by investing the time and effort usually required to produce a literary interpretation. For another, the writer may exploit existing literary forms, such as the sonnet or the three-volume novel, the play's emphasis on dialogue, or the absence of normal narrative. Again, the presentation of the material (varying typefaces, for example; or blank or blacked-out pages) may provide evidence of the writer's intentions. She may make use of "foregrounding". She may raise the level of reading difficulty or choose lexical items that require more effort than a readily available alternative would do. Any of these aspects of the presentation can act as evidence for the writer's intention that the reader aim at a literary interpretation of the work.

But evidence of her intentions is no guarantee that the reader will actually be able to

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[67] Examples of both come readily to mind. Trollope, who was extremely well received in his time, fell out of favour for nearly a century among academics; Austen was ignored for almost as long. On the other hand, Melville's later works, reviled in the 1850s, have been gaining audiences and critical acclaim since the 1930s, until now there is a positive Melville industry. "Forgotten" writers are brought to light year after year, as the poet Mary Leapor has been; the test of their worth, of course, is whether they are as promptly forgotten after the initial attention fades away.

produce a literary interpretation. Bad writers, as I have mentioned, communicate the same presumption of relevance as good ones; but they cannot carry through on their promises. We can then distinguish between successful and unsuccessful literary works, just as we can between successful and unsuccessful literary interpretations, though in a different way. All literary interpretations, I have claimed, can be evaluated by the criterion of consistency with the principle of relevance - though as I have noted, most will fall short in some respect. All will attempt to recognise the interpretation the writer intended her readers to recognise. All literary works (good and bad) create a presumption that the attempt to produce such an interpretation will be worth the reader's efforts. The worst will never support such interpretations; the best will continue to do so long after the audiences and conditions of which the writer could have been aware have disappeared.

In fact, what we find is that, in discussing literary works, we are moving towards a discussion of what constitutes a classic work. This vexed subject is currently of topical importance as institutions debate which works should be included in the core syllabus of their humanities programmes. It's impossible to consider this question without some notion of what constitutes a classic. Most traditionalists assume that classic works must be taught; and revisionists, like Fish, argue that classics are merely the signs of cultural hegemony and do not exist in fact. I want briefly to consider the notion of classicality and the problems it raises, and then to suggest a way to understand classicality that effectively removes the argument from political and social agendas for the moment.

8. Classicality and literariness: A relevance-theoretic discussion

We feel intuitively that we know (or ought to know) what a classic is. However, it's not so easy to diagnose classicality, as the following passage demonstrates:

(13) The now fashionable comparison or contrast of Charles Reade with George Eliot seems to me altogether less profitable and less reasonable than a contrast or comparison of his work with that of [Dumas or Scott]. ...What Charles Reade at his best could do, George Eliot could not even have attempted; what George Eliot could achieve at her best would have been ... impossible for Charles Reade to accomplish...

...A story better conceived or better composed, better constructed or better related,

than *The Cloister and the Hearth,* it would be difficult to find anywhere... [68]

Swinburne, surely no mean critic, wrote this appreciation of Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth* around the time *Middlemarch* was published. Leaving aside evident biases (Swinburne says that while Eliot is not quite a "petticoated Shakespeare", the "male novelist" is incomparably superior) modern readers would likely be at a loss to account for the critic's high opinion of the "sentimental melodrama" (Burns 1961: 49) which Reade typically produced, a term that certainly sums up this medieval romance. And Swinburne was not alone: though Reade is now a "neglected, almost a forgotten novelist" (Burns 1961: 11), Malcolm Elwin reports that Reade was considered "the equal of Dickens", and even Henry James placed him in the first rank of English novelists (Burns 1961: 11). Reade's critical decline can be traced in the revised opinions of another critic, W D Howells, considering Reade's novel *Christie Johnson*:

(14) ...the highest type of novelist is he who can most winningly impart the sense of womanhood. Charles Reade could do this beyond Dickens and beyond Thackeray; and so let the fact praise him as it may. (Burns 1961: 113)

(15) I read that book [*Christie Johnson*] again, after ... thirty years; I read it with amazement at its prevailing artistic vulgarity, its prevailing aesthetic error ... with lapses into the fool's paradise of romanticism, and an apparent content with its inanity and impossibility. But then it was brilliantly new and surprising; it seemed to be the last word that could be said for truth in fiction; and it had a spell that held us like an anaesthetic... (Burns 1961: 113)

Modern critics have been even harder on Reade. Orwell wrote that Reade produced "several dull books, and *The Cloister and the Hearth* is one of them" (Burns 1961: 309); though, like Reade's contemporaries, he also believed that Reade's best works would "outlive the entire works of Meredith and George Eliot" (Burns 1961: 309). Yet, at the time Burns wrote his study of Reade (1961), he was able to say that Reade's medieval romance "has long been considered a literary classic" (Burns 1961: 12), a fact explained by Orwell's comment on how Reade's works retained currency for so long:

(16) Since Charles Reade's books are published in cheap editions, one can assume that he still has his following; but it is unusual to meet anyone who has voluntarily read him. In most people his name seems to evoke, at most, a vague memory of "doing" *The Cloister and the Hearth* as a school holiday task. (Burns 1961: 309)

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[68] Algernon Charles Swinburne, "Appreciation", Everyman's Library (1906) edition of Charles Reade's *The Cloister and the Hearth.*

More than a century after his death, only casual readers of Orwell's generation have any recollection of Reade's most famous novel; and their fondness for it seems attributable more to nostalgia for school days than to any positive virtues the work might have. Reade's decay from best-seller to neglect, in contrast with his high standing among his peers and contemporaries of the Victorian era, have ensured a continuing academic interest in his works, but they seem not to have regained the classic status Swinburne and others assumed of them.

Reade's case, then, neatly illustrates the problem of classicality. His treatment would seem to bear out conventionalist critics' claim that classicality (like literariness) is bestowed by interpretive or authoritative communities. To become a classic, critics such as Fish argue, a work must embody, illuminate, or pass on the values, ideas and interpretive frameworks of the ruling ethos. Such critics claim that works which counter, subvert or undermine these values will not be accorded a classic standing, will be neglected or suppressed on publication, and will vanish into the margins of the culture or of history. They further claim that a list of works considered classic will be the best guide to the ethos and values of the ruling classes. In effect, they say, a ruling group (or hegemony) that represents the prevailing ideas of a culture carries out a kind of "intellectual sanitation", classifying certain types of literary works as "waste", and removing them from consideration. This ruling group, they argue, though its values and membership actually change over time, will always see itself as preserving traditional values; its members remain blind to the differences between past and present since their interpretations are always in current terms.

Those who press this view of classicality are countered by the essentialists, who must explain why, if classicality is a matter of the intrinsic value of a work, literary fortunes like Reade's (and many others) are subject to such extreme variation. These critics have tended to focus on the intrinsic linguistic and literary qualities of texts considered classic, with results that parallel analogous attempts to explain literary interpretation and literariness.[69] Having developed a view of literary interpretation in a relevance-theoretic framework, however, and used this as the basis for a brief discussion of literariness, I want to explore the notion of classicality along the same lines. That is, I will look at the notion of the literary classic work from the perspective of literary interpretation, and developing the claims

[69] Their arguments parallel the various approaches to textual meaning that I discussed in Chapter 1. For more on the claims, and criticisms of them, see Baehr and O'Brien's treatment of the problem 1994: 79-104.

sketched in the previous sections.

Before doing this, however, I will look at some ideas that have already been proposed for the diagnosis and understanding of classicality. Rather than using literary critics' arguments as a starting point, I will refer in detail to the discussion of the sociologist Peter Baehr and the historian Mike O'Brien on classics in sociology. After all, classics have been identified in many fields besides literature. If my line of reasoning about what makes a literary work a classic is to have any merit, it should shed some light on what makes a classic in the social sciences as well as in the arts. I'll begin with a summary of Baehr and O'Brien's discussion.

In "Founders, Classics, and the Concept of a Canon" (1994), Baehr and O'Brien examine the notion of "classics" in sociology. Although necessarily narrowly focused, their discussion of what constitutes a classic and how it is recognized and treated, and their considerations of the meaning of "canon", can be usefully applied to comparable problems in literature. I want to examine how relevance theory can account for the intuitions and make some headway in solving the problems.

Baehr and O'Brien tell us that a"`classic'...belongs to a select pantheon of texts by virtue of its peculiar eminence and exemplary character" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 1): it is, therefore, both highly salient in some ways, and conveys, either originally or with peculiar felicity, ideas or procedures which are central to the practice of the field. Typically, classics are those works which have stood the test of time (that is, which are relevant for readers greatly removed in time from the originally intended audience), though as they point out, a "`modern classic' is not necessarily an oxymoron" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 54). A "modern classic" will then contain "qualities which are seen by a literate and influential public as particularly important" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 54). Presumably the difference between a modern classic and an established classic depends on the length of time the literate and influential public takes to make up its mind, and whether future readers agree with its decision. Nevertheless, all "classic texts are great and dynamic ones - rather than the fossilized deposits of an antediluvian culture" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 55).

The notion of "a successful literary work" that I have been developing is in many ways synonymous with this sense of the term "classic". Any work possessing literary qualities, or which is acknowledged as literary, is presumed to be (at least to some extent) "great and dynamic", "peculiarly eminent and exemplary", and to possess qualities "seen by

a literate and influential public as important". Significantly, many of those works treated as classics in other disciplines - and not just the humanities - are often also acknowledged as literary, or as possessing literary qualities.

On the other hand, the *uses* of classics in sociology are irrelevant to the discussion of literature. Literary works do not reduce the complexity of the field of literary studies; nor do they "embody the ... logics that comprise the discipline's theoretical substructure." (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 57) Neither can they "offer *standards of excellence*" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 57) for practitioners of literature: each work necessarily stands on its own. And although one work or another may be said to be the *ne plus ultra* of a particular practice or genre, it does not thereby become a model for other writers. Students of literature do not seek to emulate the works they study; and writers must not try to. As well, literary classics do not "provide a discipline ... with vital perspectives and methods which facilitate the ... research process"; they are not norms by which individuals and schools can be "legitimated"; and they only peripherally offer "a sense of *historical continuity*" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 59-60).

Nevertheless, we have a strong intuition that classics do something that other works do not. "Classical texts must perform some kind of work which sets them apart from the ordinary, or even the `interesting'" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 63).[70] Baehr and O'Brien set out the relevant intuitions and arguments on classicality. They state initially that while they will begin with their "own observations on what classicality, in the context of sociological theory, seems minimally to imply", they believe that the search for criteria is futile. Instead they will "show why the attempt to produce a check-list of classical attributes invariably runs into problems that are probably insoluble" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 81).

Baehr and O'Brien challenge the notion that classics are necessarily distinguished by "deadness", either of the subject or the writer, though this condition is "propitious" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 79). Living writers of sociological "classics" are in a position to safeguard

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[70] Interestingly from a literary standpoint, Baehr and O'Brien tell us that the authors of classic works "have not only been able, with supreme mastery, to convince their public that they have `been there' (among the Zande, the Melanesians, etc.), but that `had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded'" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 63). Baehr and O'Brien could as easily be describing the intuitive reactions of readers of literature, who often comment on the "inevitability" of classic works ("such and such a book couldn't have been written any other way") and on the way writers create fictional worlds that are often more "real" than the lived one (see Pavel 1986). The authors quote Murray S Davis's argument (Davis 1986) that "for a social theory to be deemed classic, its truth is less important than its ability to seduce" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 63). Davis' comment is evidently relevant to literary works: where truth is not an issue, seduction - persuasion - is paramount.

the interpretation and reception of their works, or to correct what they come to see as errors in their earlier work. It is not really the fact of their being living writers, though, that can "exert a constant destabilizing force on their own oeuvre" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 79), but rather the fact of their being contemporary. Without the critical distance which only the passage of time affords, "their work is ... too contemporary for their peers to know whether what they are saying is classically worthy - or just topical or interesting or provocative" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 79). As the "collective property of the community that uses it" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 79), the work of a dead author can be appropriated in whatever way the reader sees fit. The notions of collective property and of reader appropriation play a large part in many accounts of how classics come to be.

Their description of the various ways in which works become recognized as "classics" makes clear that although the "author's death or silence may be advantageous for a text's assumption of classic status" it is "not essential for it" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 80). In addition, in ways that are familiar to students of literature, the fortunes of classics are themselves unstable. Authors and works enjoy vogues, which though they can be partly attributed to the whims of fashion, are fundamentally directed by the same processes that drive the recognition or "recovery" of classics in sociology. We come back then to "the properties which ostensibly make a text classic" which "still remain elusive, enigmatic, tantalizing" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 82).

Three attempts to define classics in sociology have recently been made, by Jem Thomas (1992), Conal Condren (1985) and Michael Levin (1973). In each case, the criteria more closely resemble evaluations than features that can be tested for and assessed. And in each case, many of the arguments apply equally well, *mutatis mutandis*, to literary texts.

Thomas suggests "that a classic is a work which `play[s] so important a role in the development of [a] discipline or tradition that any history must refer to it'" (Thomas 1992: 114, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 82). Furthermore, "a classic text `contain[s] an account of the way things are that is so powerful that subsequent generations are able to shake it off, if at all, only with the greatest intellectual difficulty'", and is "`so *rich* that it is capable of frequent reinterpretation, and moreover, rewards that reinterpretation, making it a worthwhile thing to do'" (Thomas 1992: 114, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83).

Condren argues against the criteria of "`originality', `influence' and `coherence'" which are usually supposed to mark out classic works. Instead, he believes that classicality is a

measure of the degree to which a work has been adopted or "appropriated" by a group. The purpose of this adoption is to legitimate or authorize the group's activities, position or politics. He suggests that a classic work is therefore marked by "ambiguity" (by which it appears he means ambivalence or "vagueness"): "`The ambiguous, then, can provide an important mechanism by which otherwise different groups can find salvation under one banner and share a common vocabulary for the variety of future actions and expressions of belief'" (Condren 1985: 173-176, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83-84).

Levin lists five criteria for classicality:

(17)
1. Philosophical quality.
2. Original content.
3. Influence on events or on other political theorists.
4. The foremost example of a certain category of thought.
5. Extended relevance beyond their own time of publication to the present, or even to provide judgements of universal application. (Levin 1973: 463, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 84)

Baehr and O'Brien argue against all these "putative criteria". Thomas' they find "cryptic", "subject to differing kinds of measure" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83). In fact, Thomas' criteria are entirely subjective and hence cannot be empirically verified or quantified. Condren's suggestion of "ambiguity" they find more attractive, but as they point out, while "ambiguity" (or, as I would prefer, "indeterminacy") may be a necessary condition for a work to achieve classic status, it is hardly sufficient: "One could easily come up with multitudes of very ambiguous texts which no serious observer would deem `classic'" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 84). Levin himself dismisses the first two of his five criteria in a test of Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, and argues that Locke's work has been shown over time not to have significantly influenced either events or other theorists. Levin, and the authors, focus on those criteria which Baehr and O'Brien call "retrospective". Although they do not reject Levin's proposal, they correctly identify these criteria as "`extra-textual'" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 84-85).

And here, having decided that none of these criteria can be quantified or empirically demonstrated, they abandon the "[a]ttempts to formulate a single, universal set of criteria which are both necessary and sufficient". Their argument is that such attempts "rest ultimately upon the flawed assumption that all classics follow the *same* pattern in attaining

their status and that they become classics for the *same* reasons" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 85). Assuming that if the criteria are fixed, then the process by which a work becomes (or is recognized as) "classic" is also fixed, they see the "divergent readings to which the classics are subject and the diversity of views regarding what it is about their work that makes them especially valuable", and the changing fortunes of classic works (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 85), as evidence that such criteria do not exist.

It is precisely here, in fact, that relevance theory may provide the basis on which to understand both the criteria for classicality and the process by which a work becomes recognized as classic. If we take a relevance-theoretic approach, we may decide that it is precisely the process of interpretation which "determines", or, perhaps better, "reveals" which works will attain classic status, and which will fade into obscurity. More interestingly still, a relevance-theoretic account may explain why certain works, once considered classics, fall from grace; and may shed light on the far more difficult problem of why "a text which failed to ... [attain classic status] at one time could ... become a classic at another", later time (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 85). It is to this that I now turn.

9. Classicality: context, effect and relevance

Let's go back for a moment to Thomas' intuitions about classics. These are worth quoting in their entirety:

(18) [A] classic text "contain[s] an account of the way things are that is so powerful that subsequent generations are able to shake it off, if at all, only with the greatest intellectual difficulty" (Thomas 1992: 114, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83).

(19) [A] classic text is one "that is so *rich* that it is capable of frequent reinterpretation and, moreover, rewards that reinterpretation, making it a worthwhile thing to do" (Thomas 1992: 114, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83).

Both criteria are dismissed by Baehr and O'Brien. Of the first, they argue that of four works (by Parsons, Mannheim, Marx and Durkheim) generally acknowledged to be rich and powerful in this way, the first two are not classics because, as Thomas notes, they "`were in important and irrefragable ways *wrong*'" (Thomas 1992: 115, in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83). This, however, is not really enough to disqualify a work from being a classic. As Baehr and

O'Brien point out, there are sociologists who would also say Marx and Durkheim were equally wrong, while still acknowledging that their works are sociological classics. The last two works would seem to be counter-examples to the first criterion. The problem is that the first criterion is so vague that one can't tell whether it does or does not allow for works which are now generally acknowledged to be wrong. About the second point, Baehr and O'Brien say that "what is `rich' and `powerful' will inevitably be a matter of contention, subject to differing kinds of measure" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83). It is also too vaguely formulated to be useful.

I want to take up Thomas' points and show that they can be expressed in fairly precise terms in a relevance-theoretic framework. I will argue that classics are works whose relevance - in the technical sense - not only endures but increases. We can see this if we examine classics in terms of context and effects, and see how readers far removed from the addressees envisaged by the writers can continue to produce both spontaneous and literary interpretations that yield rich effects, which continue to increase as more effort is expended.

Let's begin with the second of Thomas' criteria. I have been arguing that one of the salient characteristics of the literary interpretation is its openness to revision and extension. We have seen that the complexity and richness of the literary work can be expressed in terms of contextual effects, and of the strength with which they are communicated. An utterance that communicates a very wide range of weak implicatures will yield "impressions". In the literary interpretation, the reader, aiming to account for all the evidence provided, will expend extra efforts to explore different lines of interpretation. These explorations consist precisely in making some part of the range of weak implicatures far more manifest, and of looking for future conclusions which will justify the effort expended.

Because poetic effects are achieved by making so many assumptions slightly more manifest, the reader has many possible lines of interpretation to explore. Exploring them takes time and effort. When these efforts pay off with a large set of further implicatures (shading off into implications derived on the reader's own responsibility in the way described above), we feel that our efforts have been "richly" rewarded. Works which repay this effort at many points are clearly rich, in that they amply reward the reader for efforts made beyond those required for spontaneous interpretations.

We can therefore describe richness in something approaching quantitative terms: works which "condense" a wide range of effects in return for the effort expended, and which

permit the reader to develop a wide range of acceptable lines of interpretation, are rich. We should bear in mind that the constraint on these qualities is the one involved in all exegetical interpretation: the writer's intention. It is not enough to say that a work is rich because it gives rise to many contextual implications: for that matter, so do many natural phenomena (such as thunderstorms at sea). Instead, we must consider a work in terms of its *implicatures*: those implications which the writer manifestly intended the reader to recover or identify, and entertain as true or probably true. Works which otherwise produce a wide range of effects, but without any evidence of the writer's having intended them, cannot be considered as communicating these effects and so fall outside the consideration of this thesis.[71]

Thomas' first criterion of "power" (18) may be expressed as "persuasiveness", or influence (ease of accessibility). Baehr and O'Brien's objection to the criterion of power (18) is quite grave, since it seems to demonstrate that four works may share all relevant qualities without also sharing classic status. Let us explore the notion of context for some insight into how this criterion might be important. We have seen that a work is rich as long as it has rich implicatures - that is, yields a wide range of implicatures for the processing effort expended. There are works which continue to yield a wide range of implicatures in a very wide range of contexts. We have only to imagine the extremely wide range of contexts in which, say, Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, has been processed to see how contexts may differ very widely indeed.[72] Works which continue to yield the variety of interpretations, particularly when time and cultural changes have intervened, are rich in a further important way. The notion of richness would thus include both wide implicatures and variety of contexts.

Let us turn now to what makes a work "powerful", that is, persuasive or influential. Recall my examples of didactic novels, such as Sinclair's *The Jungle*. His reader is intended to recognise Sinclair's intention to convince the reader of certain political or social truths. A work which makes this intention manifest, but does not succeed in convincing the reader to represent these assumptions as true or probably true, while it has not failed as communication, has failed persuasively. A work which is able to convince the reader to represent such

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[71] For this reason, spurious classics are not my concern. Twain's criticism of "McClintock's" novel *A Cure for the Blues* praises the author for having produced a work which gives rise to a very great many effects, and which has given him and others many hours of pleasure. He makes clear, however, that both the effects and the pleasure are of a kind that manifestly were never intended by the writer.

[72] See Baehr's *Caesar and the Fading of the Roman World* (forthcoming) on the figure of Julius Caesar, and the influence the play has had, for an overview of typical contextual uses.

assumptions as true, particularly when this involves eliminating previously-held assumptions in the reader's cognitive environment, could also be described as persuasively powerful. To the extent that we accept these implications as true or probably true, our view of the world will be changed.

So we may conclude that a work is rich as long as it has rich implicatures in a wide variety of contexts; and powerful if it persuades the reader to accept these implicatures as true or probably true. A work can have one of these qualities without the other. We should look at an example to see how these qualities might manifest themselves.

No comprehensive study of the development of the novel (especially the melodrama) in the United States is complete without a consideration of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In fact, no history of the American Civil War is complete without at least a mention of "the little lady who started the great war", as Lincoln called her. Nevertheless, for more than a century this novel has been relegated to the category of "women's fiction" and rarely been studied as a serious work. Its recent change in fortunes (in terms of strictly literary considerations) owes at least as much to the attention given to cultural and women's studies as to its inherent quality.

Uncle Tom's Cabin is a rattling good story; it still charms and captivates student readers who discover it is far more like their usual narrative choices than, say, Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Silko's *Ceremony*. Yet its classic status - unchallenged in literary historical studies at least - is problematic. How can we account for the fact that a racist, pietist melodrama must be taken into consideration in literary studies; must apparently be regarded as a classic?

Thomas expresses the reason intuitively: a classic exerts a hold not just on its own but on "subsequent generations". We can see that this is the case if the implications of a work become part of the readily accessible context for readers beyond those envisaged by the writer. Stowe, for instance, was writing in "white-hot" indignation and anger; her purpose - the abolition of slavery - was strictly utilitarian and short-term; her motives characteristic of a particular class of American Methodists. Her ostensive intentions are still quite clear, and the emotional impact of the narrative quite powerful. Nevertheless, I would argue that it is not the work itself, but the way in which it affected the contexts shared - and passed on - by her readers, that has given the novel its classic status.

Characters such as Topsy, events such as Eliza's desperate crossing of the Ohio river,

and stereotypes such as Simon Legree made such an impact on a vast reading public that assumptions about them formed part of the readily accessible and frequently exploited contexts of generations of Americans. The fact that the novel was dramatized frequently, and to enormous audiences, and in defence of both pro- and anti-slavery advocates, ensured that Uncle Tom became a figure familiar to millions. As black Americans began finally to claim the rights that had been granted them by the 18th Amendment abolishing slavery, they also appropriated the central figures of this familiar story. By then, of course, the figure of Uncle Tom, as he was understood by those who had never read the novel, bore little resemblance to Stowe's stalwart Christian hero. Recent criticism has attempted to repair the damage done to the general reception of the novel by its classic status, using the writer's manifest intentions as a criterion for the interpretation of the work.

How, specifically, did the novel's characters, events, and symbols become part of this readily accessible context? The vast numbers of copies sold indicate that there were, literally, millions of readers (the novel was at the time the second most widely read book in the world after the Bible). It was translated into other languages and media, and souvenir items (cups, plates, chromos, cushions, dolls) made the novel the centre of a marketing craze. The characters (especially the stereotypes) and the events were not just common currency; they allowed Stowe's contemporaries to discuss complex, important issues in readily accessible and understandable, human terms. Because the novel was at the core of a political, social and religious maelstrom, and because it expressed fundamental and pressing issues in comprehensible terms, many of its elements entered the cultural context of its period. Of course, the novel itself was, after a while, hardly read at all.

Because the issues raised by the novel (the repercussions of slavery, the social status of black Americans, the racist heritage, the involvement of religion in politics) have never really been resolved in American society, and because the elements have been appropriated and altered to suit the state of the issues at any given time, the novel continues to be important. It allows the reader to understand some aspects of the cultural and historical background to current social problems while accurately capturing enduring attitudes and assumptions about these matters from a variety of perspectives. To a degree its importance is separate from its "literariness" (its capacity to support a wide range of literary interpretations over time). Still, I would argue that because of conditions crucial to the novel, but independent of it, it "contains[s] an account of the way things are that is so powerful that

subsequent generations are able to shake it off, if at all, only with the greatest difficulty" (Thomas 1992: 114 quoted in Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 83).

Clearly *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is exceptional. *Coriolanus*, though probably equally topical at any given period (appropriately interpreted) has not become part of our cultural context in anything like the same way. Nevertheless, we can certainly call the play a classic, especially on the grounds of its richness and power. I don't want to argue that all classic works become classics for the same reasons, but rather that they all are granted classic status on the basis of the same conditions, and in the same way - through supporting literary interpretations, and by becoming part of contexts that are both readily accessible and capable of contributing to relevance.

In the case of works of varying quality (that is, varying in the degree to which they reward frequent reinterpretation), we may find that their content, effects, even their very existence, are indispensably part of the context required to interpret subsequent works. Such works clearly are also classics in the sense we usually understand the word. We can explain the use of this term, though, by showing that without these works, certain highly relevant assumptions needed for the interpretation of a subsequent (even closely contemporary) work will not be accessible. Without having read this previous text, the reader of another work cannot properly recognise the interpretation the writer intended him to recover. His interpretation will always fail to some degree. The degree to which the particular assumptions provided by reading the previous text are central to recognising the intended interpretation of the later text will be the degree to which the earlier work is considered a classic *on these grounds at least.*

Works can be considered classic, then, on the grounds of their intrinsic qualities, the degree to which they reward frequent reinterpretation, or, in the terms I've been developing, the degree to which they support literary interpretations by a heterogeneous audience over a period of time. But they can also be classics, regardless of these intrinsic qualities, if they provide indispensable contextual assumptions required for exegetical interpretation of other works. We can read Mary Leapor's poetry, for example, for its intrinsic merit. Frequent re-reading brings rich rewards for both literary and non-literary interpretations. However, if we read Leapor and neglect to read Pope, her contemporary, we cannot recognise the interpretation of some of her poems that Leapor intended us to have (see Greene (1993: 121). We will not have available assumptions which were both readily accessible and highly

relevant to her, and which she expected her reader to use in constructing the context in which she intended him to process her poem.[73]

We can sum up this part of the argument in this way: the audience for a literary work is not specifically envisaged or specifically addressed, but characterised in rather general terms by the writer. Such an audience must be capable of supplying the intended contextual assumptions, as evidenced by the style and content of the work. We are entitled, as always, to accept the first interpretation consistent with principle of relevance - but it may take some effort to establish what these intended assumptions are. For this reason, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is as indispensable in reading some works (Wright's *Native Son*, for instance) as the *Odyssey* is for Joyce's *Ulysses*, or *Hamlet* is for Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead.* If we aim for literary interpretations of texts for which these works provide crucial contextual assumptions, we must read the earlier works. We may then see classicality (by this criterion, at least) not so much as a matter of cultural hegemony or the dictum of an interpretive community, but in terms of cognition and communication.

A classic work will continue to be relevant, that is, to provide rich poetic effects for an audience increasingly removed, by time, history, culture, from that audience originally envisaged by the writer. Most readers still recover the intended interpretation as they would with any other contemporary work (with, of course, appropriate extensions of context to include relevant or necessary historical facts and encyclopedic knowledge). Importantly, classic texts also continue to support spontaneous interpretations (and eisegetical readings). Those classics still read for the sheer delight they provide, or for the way they affect the reader's view of the world, will almost certainly show literary qualities by virtue of supporting literary interpretations. The farther removed in time and space a classic work is from the audience that finds genuine pleasure in reading it (in producing spontaneous interpretations of it), the more literary it is likely to be. Works which produce only "literary" interpretations are precisely the kind of classics that are most likely to reveal the biases of the academic elite; works which produce only spontaneous ones, the biases of the masses; works which produce only eisegetical readings, the biases of restricted interest groups.

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[73] For more on the link between Leapor and Pope, see Greene (1993). I have chosen Leapor because her rediscovery raises many of the issues surrounding classicality, context and the canon. The fact that her poetry is still rewarding is a strong argument for its classic status; nevertheless, she cannot be read in isolation from her contemporaries on the grounds of gender politics - at least, not if we are seeking to interpret her works as communication (exegetically) rather than as evidence of sexual oppression (eisegetically).

In understanding the notion of classicality, we don't need to worry about reception theories, or essential qualities of the text tied to specific linguistic or literary elements. And we don't need to treat the idea that "all classics follow the *same* pattern in attaining their status and that they become classics for the *same* reasons" (Baehr and O'Brien 1994: 85) as problematic. I would actually argue that they do: but that these patterns and these reasons do not apply to the *content* of the text. On the contrary, I locate the patterns and the reasons in the cognitive process by which all texts are interpreted. By moving from content to cognition, from essential properties of the text to essential aspects of communication, we move from intrinsic properties to something more relational. We introduce considerations of the reception of texts, situated in the mind of the reader and not in the work, considerations of the intentions of authors about that reception, and of the concern of readers to identify those intentions.

In this way, we avoid socio-cultural relativism: the argument that it is the authority of interpretive communities (Fish 1980) which determines classicality; or reading conventions (Abrams 1977); or codes (Barthes 1975); or "institutional forces" (Ray 1984). Instead we have a solid basis for accounting for the perennial appeal and importance of classic texts; for the varying fortunes which they undergo through the years in the process of interpretation. It is, of course, up to those in sociology to see whether these general arguments apply to sociological or other academic texts regarded as classics. I am attempting to develop my arguments not through a theory specific to any field or discipline, but through a general theory of cognition with special application to communication. If my arguments hold for the interpretation of literary texts, then they ought to hold for the interpretation of texts in other fields as well.

10. Relevance and the canon: canonicity, cognition, context

We can see how the arguments of the preceding sections will bear on a discussion of the canon. I don't intend to develop these arguments in any detail, but rather to sketch out how the general stance I have been developing could affect debates on the nature of the canon, and what works, if any, should always be included in the core syllabus of cultural studies and the humanities. I should point out that I have no intention of prescribing a canon. Instead, I want to describe what I believe the canon does, and show that decisions about core

texts should continue to be revised or at least discussed over time. It seems clear that questions of influence, literariness, and context cannot be resolved on the basis of a narrow selection of readers, readings, or applications. Until a work has produced a sufficiently wide variety of interpretations over the course of at least one or two "generations", we cannot judge how necessary its inclusion in the canon will be.

We can begin by revising our understanding of what the canon is supposed to do. For those who support the traditional canon (Bloom 1994, for instance), its importance lies in its transmission of cultural knowledge and shared values. Precisely because there is no consensus on what is meant by either of these terms, and because debate continues on whether what is generally understood by either of them is worth preserving, this argument is bound to lead to disagreement. Those who want to make the canon more inclusive actually share Bloom's aims, but have a different concept of culture. They are usually engaged in reclaiming a place in the cultural centre for those whose works have often been ignored by the academic elites (educational institutions) or suppressed by the authorities (civic, legal, or social). In this debate, the traditional choices for the canon are seen as conserving previous social systems into the present, while revisionist choices are intended to alter present and future social systems away from past errors or exclusions.

I would suggest that the purpose of the canon is quite different. In the previous sections I have argued for an understanding of literariness and classicality based on the application of relevance theory. Works may continue to be relevant because of their literary qualities, or their importance as providing elements of the interpretive contexts of other literary works. They may be relevant because they influence historical developments (in any number of areas). They may continue to be read by casual readers for numerous reasons. Whatever the reason for their continuing relevance (and to qualify as a classic, a work must be *highly* relevant), these are the works which ought to be considered as core works, which future readers should be acquainted with.

Ultimately, the canon consists of past works which must be read in order to produce successful interpretations of contemporary works. This success may depend on the canonical works providing very specific contextual assumptions (the *Odyssey* for *Ulysses*) or making up part of the encyclopedic background knowledge which many writers will draw on (the Bible). These works, once written, may be endlessly reinterpreted, of course, but the one

thing they cannot do is change.[74] Change, however, is precisely what contemporary conditions are always undergoing. It is for this reason that the canon ought to be constantly discussed and revised.

Present conditions, like present authors, grow out of the past but are not fully determined by it. In the complex interplay between reader, writer, text and context, there will be many assumptions which are readily accessible and highly relevant. These assumptions are available in a great many ways in a culture like ours where the mass media play a large role. As ever, the writer's assumptions about her audience will determine to a large extent which assumptions she will provide explicitly, and which she will leave implicit. The canon's relation to any work is precisely the relation between those assumptions best (or only) available through the interpretation of canonical works, and the assumptions the writer presumes are highly accessible and highly relevant to her audience. Because each writer's work will have a different relation to past works, the canon ought to be that core of text which allows the reader readiest access to the most relevant assumptions.

It ought to be emphasised, again, that some writers are more worth the effort expended than others. A canon decided on mere quantity will clearly favour the inclusion of many otherwise worthless texts. The canon ought then to be skewed toward providing access to assumptions for those contemporary works (and conditions) which best repay the efforts we make in interpreting them. This consideration will ensure that the canonical list remains relatively short, since not all conditions and works are worth our extended attention.

It should also ensure that the works on the list are subject to repeated evaluation for their usefulness. The works which were absolutely necessary for an educated contemporary of Dickens are not necessarily appropriate for the contemporaries of Solzhenitsyn.[75] The "monolith" of Victorian culture was almost certainly a sham; but the "tribalism" of our period is also an illusion, masking the reality of a vast range of shared assumptions and works. The key is to bear in mind that we do not have to use the assumptions provided by canonical works as they were intended by their writers (though in interpreting their works we must seek

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[74] I am fully aware that classic works are constantly re-edited (Shakespeare's plays are probably the most notorious example). Nevertheless, I would argue that except in rare instances, these revisions do not affect the interpretations of the work in any significant way.

[75] For an analogous example, see Baehr (forthcoming) for his discussion of the change in the accessibility of contexts for Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*; no edition can now be issued without copious footnotes, providing information Byron evidently expected his audience to have readily accessible.

to recognise these intentions). Instead, we may react against them, interpret them in new ways, incorporate them into contexts never foreseen or intended by the writers.

But we can't do any of these things unless we read them. And that is how a canon comes into existence in the first place. To ascribe a work canonical status is not to pass judgement on its intrinsic value, its redeeming qualities, or its relation to truth. To include a work in the canon is to argue for its usefulness in understanding other works which are felt to be highly relevant for any number of reasons. Once in the canon, they can be read as communication or treated as objects, to be investigated in the same way as other phenomena. If they are treated as communication, then the reader's task is to recognise the interpretation the writer intended; if as phenomena, the reader is free to treat the evidence provided by the work in any way that is relevant to him. These two purposes are not exclusive, of course; but they are different. And when we are discussing the use of written works, we must first of all treat them as communication. Only then are we entitled to treat them as evidence.

So I am not proposing criteria as such for the canon. I have no checklist of intrinsic qualities to defend. The arguments about what constitutes indispensable criteria for reading other works can and must continue. But at least part of the debate can be conducted on relevance-theoretic - communicative - as well as qualitative, political or social grounds.

Appendix A
Gray's *Elegy*

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard
Thomas Gray

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day,
 The lowing herd wind slowly o'er the lea,
The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
 And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the sight,
 And all the air a solemn stillness holds,
Save where the beetle wheels his droning flight,
 And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds;

Save from that yonder ivy-mantled tower
 The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such, as wandering near her ancient bower,
 Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew tree's shade
 Where heaves the turf in many a mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell forever laid,
 The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

The breezy call of incense-breathing Morn,
 The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,
The cock's shrill clarion, or the echoing horn,
 No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall burn,
 Or busy housewife ply her evening care;
No children run to lisp their sire's return,
 Or climb his knee the envied kiss to share.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield,
 Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke;
How jocund did they drive their team afield!
 How bowed the woods beneath their sturdy stroke!

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,
 Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;
Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile
 The short and simple annals of the poor.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,

And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Awaits alike the inevitable hour.
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to them the fault,
If Memory o'er their tombs no trophies raise,
Where through the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Can storied urn or animated bust
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath?
Can Honour's voice provoke the silent dust,
Or flattery soothe the dull cold ear of death?

Perhaps in this neglected spot is laid
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire;
Hands that the rod of empire might have swayed,
Or waked to ecstasy the living lyre.

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page
Rich with the spoils of time did ne'er unroll;
Chill Penury repressed their noble rage,
And froze the genial current of the soul.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear:
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,
And waste its fragrance on the desert air.

Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest,
Some Cromwell guiltless of his country's blood.

The applause of listening senates to command,
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,
And read their history in a nation's eyes,

Their lot forbade: nor circumscribed alone
Their growing virtues, but their crimes confined;
Forbade to wade through slaughter to a throne,
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind,

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,

Or heap the shrine of Luxury and Pride
With incense kindled at the Muses' flame.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,
Their sober wishes never learned to stray;
Along the cool sequestered vale of life
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet even these bones from insult to protect
Some frail memorial still erected nigh;
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture decked,
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

Their name, their years, spelt by the unlettered Muse,
The place of fame and elegy supply:
And many a holy text around them strews,
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

For who to dumb forgetfulness a prey,
This pleasing anxious being e'er resigned,
Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,
Nor cast one longing lingering look behind?

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,
Some pious drops the closing eye requires;
Even from the tomb the voice of Nature cries,
Even in our ashes live their unwonted fires.

For thee, who mindful of the unhonoured dead
Dost in these lines their artless tale relate;
If chance, by lonely contemplation led,
Some kindred spirit shall inquire thy fate,

Haply some hoary-headed swain may say,
"Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn
Brushing with hasty steps the dews away
To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

"There at the foot of yonder nodding beech
That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,
His listless length at noontide would he stretch,
And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

"Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,
Muttering his wayward fancies he would rove,
Now drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn,
Or crazed with care, or crossed in hopeless love.

"One more I missed him on the customed hill,
  Along the heath and near his favourite tree;
Another came; nor yet beside the rill,
  Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he;

"The next with dirges due in sad array
  Slow through the churchway path we saw him borne.
Approach and read (for thou canst read) the lay,
  Graved on the stone beneath yon aged thorne."

THE EPITAPH

Here rests his head upon the lap of Earth
A youth to Fortune and to Fame unknown.
Fair Science frowned not on his humble birth,
And Melancholy marked him for her own.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere,
Heaven did a recompense as largely send:
He gave to Misery all he had, a tear,
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode
(There they alike in trembling hope repose),
The bosom of his Father and his God.

[c1742-50] 1751

Appendix B

Gray's *Elegy*: variant readings

Lonsdale (1973): Escape from isolation into sympathy

The fourteenth stanza is central to Lonsdale's interpretation. The incongruity between the metaphors the speaker uses, and the villagers they are applied to leads him to contrast the "stunted" potential of the villages, and the "hidden gem" and "unseen flower" of the youth, which is a fulfilment of his potential. The poem's sense of waste springs from the isolation and neglect of these qualities. For a fuller explanation, Lonsdale turns to the *Stanzas*, an earlier version of the *Elegy* that differs in several significant ways from it He concludes that the preceding general reflections on the relative stations of the poor and the great objectify alternatives in the poet's debate about two modes of life. The metaphors, in the *Stanzas*, of the flower and gem do not apply to the villagers' lives, but to the poet's "fulfilled but neglected perfection" which defines his sense of isolation, and which he teaches himself to accept by identifying with the villagers and their obscurity.

The *Elegy* reaches a more complex solution; the speaker has tried to find value for himself. Rejecting the corruption of the world, he is now cut off from the villagers' innocence by his education and self-consciousness. He moves from "impersonal assurance" to reliance on his "memorial" and posthumous sympathy. His eccentric behaviour, noticed by the villagers, shows just how far the speaker is from those whose innocence he covets; and how far removed from the Augustan ideal of urbane, rural retirement. The epitaph is attributed to another, unknown and sympathetic speaker, and seems to indicate how the poet will be viewed by those who follow him. The syntax of these passages of the poem is convoluted, and may indicate uneasiness on the speaker's part, though whether with his present or future prospects is hard to say.

The evidence indicates that the speaker has found an acceptable escape from himself in the contemporary doctrine of the centrality of sympathy. The *Elegy* is part of his attempt to prove he possesses this sympathy. Lonsdale believes that the circuitous techniques of the poem (multiple points of view, difficult syntax) betray that Gray is not portraying himself subjectively. He has avoided the danger that self-discovery could end in self-absorption. Pettersson points out that Lonsdale's reliance on extra-textual material focuses attention on

the speaker's subjectivity in a way Gray may not have intended; provides vital support for Lonsdale's arguments not otherwise strongly supported by the poem; and leads him to an explanation that depends on Gray's intention to present the speaker's predicament in a devious and indirect way. None of these points is central to an acceptable interpretation of the *Elegy*.

Wright (1977): Stillness versus activity

Wright claims that previous critics have not paid enough attention to the argument and language of the *Elegy*, and so have missed Gray's central argument. The poem's main point is not that the speaker aligns himself with the "simple poor" against the "haughty great". If nothing else, the speaker's fantasised epitaph is too long and sophisticated to resemble the "frail memorials" of the villagers. The central subject is the "nature and meaning of epitaphs",; the social contrast is a "subservient device" to show that the same psychological features are common to radically different groups of people and are therefore universal. The poem's argument is "logical, continuous, and compelling" where the ending of the earlier *Stanzas* was inconsistent (which is why Gray rejected it).

The poem explores the contrasts between time and timelessness, movement and stillness. The philosophical reflectiveness, the generic tableaux, and the elevated grammar locate the poem in the "eternal present"; but as the poem is spoken, the silence is broken and time slowly passes. Wright points to the passage of time indicated in lines (1-4) as evidence for this conclusion. He asserts that "stillness holds the air in its grip" but the droning beetle (7), the tinkling sheepfolds (8), the complaining owl (10) all mean that the silence is incomplete and the stillness is illusory.

These are all aspects of life. The dead, though, are beyond time and movement: theirs is "true silence", foreshadowed by this evening in the churchyard. Such stillness also awaits the great; their spatial and vocal constructs (trophies, anthems, busts) are of no avail. The poet wonders if anything has power over the stillness of death, which, Wright claims, is the implied questions of stanzas 12-15. The speaker considers greatness of achievement as a counter to stillness, but then rejects the idea. Even if such greatness is the best memorial, the poor are only half-blessed because they have less chance to do evil. Then the question is considered in terms of motion (ll. 47, 57-8) and sound (ll. 48, 59). At this point, the *Stanzas* - Gray's first attempt at this problem - lost the thread of the argument, Wright says. The insistence on the praise of innocence destroyed the more logical progression from one

kind of stillness to another: quietness (the evening), death (the villagers), oblivion (universal).

The *Elegy*, however, goes on to show that the poor do and must have memorials, for everyone needs some epitaph. The necessity for memory is the crucial point in the argument: the poet, establishing fully and gradually the universality of this need turns naturally to his own need to be memorialized. Stanzas (25-32) comprise the poet's answer to death, for they, with the villagers' narrative, maintain sound and motion - and therefore some semblance of life through memory. We should also consider what Wright calls "negative imagery" (nouns formed by prefixing "un"- or adding "less"); these are part of a general pattern of negative definition and passivity. Everything alive is withdrawing; the proud should not be arrogant as the dead are not active. The villagers are in the peculiar position of having no opportunity to develop virtues or vices; for them, the poet's death will be felt as an absence. The epitaph they serve him with is not itself in motion, but "works against stillness" because of the eye that moves in reading, and the voice that sounds in reading aloud. The text of the epitaph, though, is almost ironic, for the recourse to God in it suggests that such memorials are ultimately unnecessary. God, it seems, acts as the "only and absolute guarantee against absolute stillness", and at this juncture the argument rests.

Logsdon (1973): From affinity to imagined union

Logsdon first emphasises that he prefers not to concentrate on the discursive nature of longer poems, but to come to grips with structural principles. He refers to R Crane's injunction to identify the "informing principle" that makes a work a "distinctive whole", and which determines the "conception and handling of parts." In the *Elegy*, this structural principle is the movement in the speaker's mind from emotional affinity with the dead in the graveyard to an imagined union with them.

Logsdon says the poem has three major aspects: the setting which establishes the poet's kinship with the dead; arguments about the values of and relationship between the rich and the poor; and movement to an imagined burial. His discussion focuses on the function of each aspect; in contrast with the "vital" images of rustic life, the personification connected with the "great" have "grandiose, even inhuman" connotations. He finds that stanzas 8-12 direct irony against the monuments of the great, who, for all their power, are helpless against death which thereby equalises the poor and the proud.

Stanzas 12-19 contain the central metaphors of the gem and the flower, which reflect

the beauty and purity of the villagers and their lives, in contrast with the "ignoble strife" of the outside, greater world. So the repression mentioned in stanza 13, and in particular the word "waste" are ironic; rather than evoking sympathy, the poet intends us to see that the villagers have preserved their "simple dignity and virtue" (compare stanza 7). Stanzas 17 and 18 show that the potential for leadership, patriotism and social benevolence offered by the lives of the great are outweighed by the possible negative effects of greatness. "Noble rage" all too easily becomes "ignoble strife". Stanza 19 also favours the villagers. As a result, in his reflections on the lessons offered by the lives of the great, and the obscure, the speaker finds his affinity with his forefathers strengthened morally and emotionally. In response, he pictures his own burial and their remembrance of him, though he clearly sees the irony of wanting "remembrance" when all are "prey" to "dumb forgetfulness".

Logsdon considers the poet's thought patterns and character as revealed by the entire poem. From Stanza 4 on, the poet's affinity with the dead, provoked by his meditations based on the rural graves he sits among, leads by association and emotional response to his ultimately favouring the rustic. The immediate focus on the meditations about the graveyard are "subordinated" to the establishment of this affinity. Since the poet's wished-for identification leads to the account of his own funeral, the progression is not only based on but ends in the setting of a country graveyard. Even the speaker's final exhortation (in his imagined epitaph) not to examine his merits and frailties too closely are in accord with his desire to share the obscurity of the villagers. In spite of this, the poet's recognition of the potential for greatness in others suggests that he suspects it in himself, and this reinforces his identification with his buried forefathers he eulogises. The realisation that he will, nevertheless, remain anonymous, explains the melancholy behaviour noted by the "swain" and produces the "note of regret". Still, the poet refuses to waste his gifts; instead, he uses them to rationalise his preference for an anonymous life and death. His sense of kinship thus goes from "simple feeling for the dead villagers" to a "deeper value conviction, achieved intellectually".

Weinbrot (1978): From social dissatisfaction to quiet contentment

Weinbrot begins from R Crane's observations on this poem rather than with his comments on general principles. He sees the *Elegy* as a poem of "moral choice", in which an "ambitious young man" reconciles himself to his own obscurity by reflecting that death

comes to the great and obscure alike; that a humble life may preserve a man's innocence; and that the poet can hope to be remembered by one friend, for his merits and frailties repose in God. Weinbrot aims to combine Crane's insight with an analysis suggesting that the *Elegy* is about choosing not life or death, but eternity.

At the outset, the "speaker is mourning his own repressed potential", and is painfully unlike the villagers in his discontent with his lot. The opening four stanzas show the speaker's isolation from his environment: he is a living man among the dead; a poet among farmers; a man trying to see in the dusk; a man who, by molesting the solitude of the owl, accentuates his differences from the world around him. His alienation is shown by the contrast between the comfortable sleep of the dead and his own disturbed state of mind. His forefathers related positively to nature, while their descendant is separated from the living and the dead as the life of man is separate from the life of nature. In this context, the poet considers his lack of worldly success a fault, and not surprisingly dwells less on the ultimate "end" of man than he does on the unrealized potential for greatness of the obscure. The gem and flower metaphors indicate that the poet feels his own genius will be wasted. The line about "paths of glory" defies the rich and powerful, but does not show any reconciliation with death, for at this stage the poet is still oriented to earthly success.

From stanzas 17-19, however, there is a gradual movement toward resignation. The remembered life, in the form of memorials, is common to rich and poor. The speaker's view of the humble is changing as all walks of life are subsumed in human recollection. Lines 91-91 indicate that the poet realises that a man will attain a greater life when he is settled into the role prescribed for him by God, than he can ever aspire to while devouring himself with hopeless aspirations. This reflection causes the speaker to abandon his previous self-centredness. He accepts that his "contemplative nature" will always "set him off from others" but the sense of alienation is removed by his moral choice to link himself with the poor and humble, and to accept his lot, not questioning God's will.

Now the speaker, originally separate from the landscape, is portrayed as a "thing in nature" - that is, in the graveyard. Though once thinking that some "mute Milton" may have rested there, the poet take his place, "unknown" to fame and fortune; with a friend in God, of course, he is no longer alone. This comfort is his reward from God for the sincerity of his soul and his sympathy for others, no less than it is for his ability to adhere to the Divine Will. The final injunction to the reader not to "judge" the poet takes on an extra meaning, for such

judgement is God's alone.

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